Suzumiya Haruhi no Yami

By: Suzume CA

Haruhi seems more happy and energetic than ever, so why is it that a mysterious observer is claiming that her powers are growing more unstable, and with them, the safety of this world? What secret is Haruhi still hiding? Features characters and situations from several other series, most notably a little-known sci-fi yuri called Yami to Boushi to Hon no Tabibito.

Status: complete

Published: 2012-08-01

Updated: 2016-03-31

Words: 57926

Chapters: 9

Rated: Fiction T - Language: English - Genre: Supernatural/Sci-Fi - Reviews: 46 - Favs: 25 - Follows: 20

Original source: https://www.fanfiction.net/s/8383311/1

Exported with the assistance of FicHub.net

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Chapter 1

Suzumiya Haruhi no Yami

(The Darkness of Haruhi Suzumiya)

by Suzume CA

Part 1

Complacency, I've discovered, can be more dangerous than anything. Aliens with conflicting agendas within their own ranks? Been there. Time travelers dancing around the edges of predestiny? Done that. Shady organizations of espers with seemingly unlimited resources in this world and incredible powers in another? Old news.

But complacency? It'll get you every time, particularly if you start taking for granted that aliens, time travelers and espers are a part of everyday life. I was growing accustomed to their presence in the same way that I was finally getting used to climbing that much-loved hill every morning as I walked to school. After a while, it simply becomes part of the everyday scenery. The paradigm of what is "normal" shifts, and what was extraordinary is now mundane.

Allowing yourself to think in this manner, of course, is one of the worst ways to tempt fate, right up there with those dreaded words: "What could possibly go wrong?" You'd think I'd know by now that if you are foolish enough to ask that question, the Universe will hear you. And it will answer.

I arrived close to the bell that morning, so I didn't notice the room's new occupant right away. Instead, I found my eyes drawn to Haruhi, who was resting her head in her arms atop her desk. It was a pose so reminiscent of her melancholy days that I was momentarily taken

aback, but a closer look revealed that she just looked tired. "Oi, Haruhi," I commented as I took my seat in front of her. "Long night?"

"I was looking for comets," she muttered.

"Comets?"

She sprang up from her rested position and fixed me with a sleepy-eyed rendition of her normal manic smile. "Comets! Or asteroids, maybe, but comets are prettier. Do you know how many comets have been discovered by amateur astronomers over the years, Kyon? Also, did you know that they name the comet for its discoverer? There are worse ways to be immortalized than that, you know. I could go for having a Comet Suzumiya, especially if it ended up being one of those ones that comes back on schedule every few years."

If I remember my astronomy correctly, a comet generally takes more than a few years, but I decided not to bring this up. I wanted to ask whether she'd had any sort of plan for her search, or if she'd spent the night pointing her telescope in random directions, hoping to pick out a smudge of light in the glare-polluted night skies of the city before it could be seen by someone in a proper mountaintop observatory.

Of course, since this is Haruhi, I suppose I should be thankful that she didn't conjure an asteroid on a collision course with the Earth.

Before I could get my question out, however, the class representative made the call to rise and bow to the sensei. As ever, we made our unison show of respect, but upon sitting down, I finally noticed the change in the room.

There was a girl seated in front of the blackboard, facing the class. She wore a Kitago uniform, and had a bookbag in her lap. Her black hair was pulled back in a ponytail so long that you could legitimately have called it a horsetail instead, and even from this distance I could see that her eyes were deep blue and piercing.

"Good morning, everyone," the sensei addressed us, pausing to stifle a yawn. "As you can see, we have a new student, who will be joining us starting today." He then turned toward her. "Please introduce yourself, and then we'll find you a seat."

Even without looking back, I could tell that Haruhi had perked right up at the mention of a transfer student. The sudden outpour of Haruhic Energy was enough to make me wonder if the back of my neck might get singed.

The new student stood up, and as she did, several members of the class (possibly including myself) let out a low gasp.

She was *tall* . As in, a full head taller than the sensei. If I had to guess, I'd say she was in the neighborhood of a hundred ninety centimeters. *In school shoes* .

After taking a moment to write the kanji characters of her name on the blackboard, she turned to face us once more. " *Hajimemashite,"* she said with a bow. Her voice was moderately low-pitched and rather breathy, but it nevertheless carried to the back of the room. "My name is Azuma Hazuki. *Yoroshiku onegaishimasu* ."

As the sensei indicated a seat for her on the other side of the room, I could feel Haruhi's presence at my shoulder. "Oh, I am *so* recruiting her…"

Wasting no time to make good on her threat, at the first break Haruhi made a beeline for the new girl and bustled her out of the room before anyone else could so much as say hello to her. I took this chance to go over my notes, but only had a couple of minutes to do so before I was no longer alone.

"So whaddya think, Kyon?" Taniguchi asked, plopping himself down in the seat recently vacated by Haruhi, while Kunikida found a spot in the next row.

I don't know; I thought giving letter grades to the female students was *your* job.

"Yeah, I'm dying to hear this one," Kunikida chuckled, rolling his eyes at our perverted friend.

"Hmm," Taniguchi pondered, making a show of his thoughtful expression. "I'm going to have to give her… a solid B."

Somehow, I expected higher. His scale had a tendency to skew in that direction.

"Don't get me wrong," he said, holding his hands up to forestall any protest. "I was sitting two rows over, so I got a good eyeful. Killer legs, even with the bandages on the one, hair you could spend days running your fingers through, heart-melting eyes, and a rack that might give Asahina-san a run for her money. She's got the full package, make no mistake."

Kunikida cocked an eyebrow at him. "Then why the B?"

"I gotta take a full letter grade off for how tall she is," Taniguchi shrugged. "I can't see dating someone who looks like she could kick my ass without breaking a sweat, you know?"

I wonder how many more girls in the class that would disqualify, realistically?

"Then again," Taniguchi leered, "having a girl that tall *does* make for easy access to certain things, if you know what I'm saying."

To my endless shame, I had a pretty good idea of what he was hinting at.

"Yeah, too bad for her the height difference would also make it harder for her to knee you in the groin," came a voice that froze Taniguchi before he could take things any further down his *ecchi* road. "Then again, I'm sure she could find a way."

"Suzumiya-san," Taniguchi smiled thinly as he hurried to his feet. "I was just leaving."

And then the two of them were gone, leaving Haruhi to take her seat. Her thunderous expression quickly shifted to smugly satisfied, and I swear I could hear her humming a little tune.

"So how did the recruitment drive go?" I asked, thankful that Haruhi was not focusing her ire in my direction this time.

"I'll have to tell you at lunch," she practically sang, as the sensei's return heralded the beginning of the next class session.

I remember thinking at that moment how nice it was to see Haruhi in such a good mood, even in spite of her comet-induced lack of sleep. Truly, it was something I'd been seeing a lot more lately, and it was a sight I'd be very happy to get used to.

Remember what I said about complacency?

We stayed at our desks for lunch while the Class Representative swooped down on Azuma-san with the intent of giving her a tour of the school grounds. Taniguchi looked as though he wanted to come chat again, but Haruhi glared at him, and that was enough of that.

"So she's agreed to come to our club meeting today," Haruhi grinned as she opened her bento box.

That didn't take a lot of recruiting, if you managed it over a single break.

"I only told her the truth," Haruhi mumbled around a mouthful of rice. "She's probably going to have people descending on her like vultures, asking her to join this or that club, and if she wanted to avoid all that, she could just come hang around with me and my very interesting friends. And you, of course."

Vultures, eh? Wouldn't this make Haruhi the biggest vulture of all? Or at least the fastest?

"I don't know, Haruhi. What will Koizumi think about having competition from another mysterious transfer student?"

"Oh, she's got a lot more to her than that," Haruhi pooh-poohed me. "She's a black belt in kendo and naginatajutsu. She could be the team bruiser!"

Well, I already knew that the team had a pretty decent bruiser in the person of Nagato, but I thought it best not to bring this up.

"Anyway, she's different enough that she wouldn't be a duplicate," Haruhi went on. "I mean, she's got a nice body, but she doesn't have the sheer *moe* factor that Mikuru-chan does, and she's pretty much the polar opposite of Yuki." She then looked around for a moment before leaning in closely. "Also? I'm pretty sure she's a lesbian."

And you're just going to come right out and say that? What gives you *that* idea?

"Girls have a way of knowing these things," Haruhi sniffed. "Plus, I asked her if she had a boyfriend, and she said no, she has a girlfriend. So if she's willing to say that to a total stranger, I think it's fair game to repeat it."

"So you're… *pretty sure*, then?"

"It might be a story," she shrugged. "She's a transfer student, she's pretty hot, she stands out in a crowd, and she's probably going to have guys like that *hentai* Taniguchi all over her. She might be saying she has a girlfriend to keep the wolves at bay. But between you and me, I think it's legit."

Haruhi, please don't tell me you're inviting her just to have a token gay character in the club.

"Of course not!" she said indignantly, crossing her arms. "I'd never abuse someone's lifestyle to fill a niche. But I've always intended the SOS Brigade to be all-inclusive, and how better to show that?"

Have you ever had one of those situations where a long-dormant memory pops up at the most inopportune time, and you give it voice before your common sense can censor you?

"Well, you did once say that you were looking for someone interesting, boy or girl."

Yeah, this was one of those times.

Haruhi blushed clear back to her ears. "I'm not looking to *date* her, you idiot!" she said in a surprisingly low hiss. "Besides, she has a girlfriend, remember?"

"I'm sorry, that was in bad taste," I said, hoping to keep the peace for the time being.

"Damned right it was," she scowled, but then just as quickly she smiled. "I think we should do a good old-fashioned mystery search this weekend! You know, give her a chance to get to know us all."

"Wait, wait. She hasn't even joined the club yet, and in your head you've got her doing outside activities with us already?"

"She seemed eager to join," Haruhi grinned hugely. "I almost didn't have to say anything at all to convince her. I think she and I just clicked, that's all."

To my complacent failure, I managed to miss both of the potential warning signs in that statement: first, that someone would allow herself to be convinced by Haruhi so easily, and second, the terrifying idea that Haruhi and anyone could have "clicked" so quickly.

Haruhi had cleaning duties after classes ended that day, and somehow had managed to rope Azuma-san into staying and helping ("So we can talk!"), so I strolled leisurely to the club room. As was frequently the case, I met Koizumi outside the locked door while Asahina-san was changing into her maid costume, then followed our red-haired goddess inside once it was safe. Nagato, as always, was seated in her chair by the windows, reading a hardbound book (today's selection being *Thief of Time*, by Terry Pratchett). Asahina-san began making tea, while Koizumi made small talk about nothing in particular. By all accounts, an average day.

What could possibly go wrong?

Haruhi answered for the Universe with a BANG and a merry "Yoo-hoo!" as she slammed the door open and stepped inside, followed moments later by Azuma-san, who entered with her head slightly bowed.

"Everyone!" Haruhi called loudly enough to be heard in the next prefecture. "We have a guest and potential new member with us today! This is Azuma Hazuki-chan."

" *Hajimemashite,"* Azuma-san said again, giving the room a bow.

It was at that moment that I had the rare and much enjoyed experience of seeing Koizumi getting flustered. Overly polite semi-suck-up that he is sometimes, he rose smoothly to offer a bow in reply. "Pleased to meet you, Azuma-sa… sa..?" He trailed off at the end once he rose from his bow and found that he only came up to about her nose. The mask cracked for only a moment, but it was a memory I would treasure. He gave a small chuckle, plastering the smile back into place. "Koizumi Itsuki, at your service."

"Potential… new member?" Asahina-san said with a nervous tone that only served to make her cuter than usual.

"That's right!" Haruhi beamed, grabbing Azuma-san by the hand and dragging her over to the much shorter girl. "This is Mikuru-chan, the

club mascot. Anything you want her to do for you, just ask me. Over there by the window is Yuki, and… did you meet Kyon before?"

I stood to greet her as well, sighing inwardly as another chance to avoid the dreaded nickname went by the boards. "I don't believe so, but I'm in the same class as you and Haruhi. Pleased to make your acquaintance."

"Thank you, um, Kyon-kun," she said, giving me a bow and a tiny smile. She seemed a bit shy, but who could blame her after being swept into this room by Hurricane Haruhi?

"Um, would you like some tea, Azuma-san?" Asahina-san asked.

"That would be lovely. Thank you."

Any further potential interaction with our soft-voiced guest was quickly swept aside as Haruhi gave her the whirlwind tour of the room, showing her the costume rack, the assortment of knickknacks she had accumulated over time, and then the computer, which she quickly opened to the Brigade's website. I met Koizumi's eyes across the table as Asahina-san poured some of her exquisite brew, and we both gave a shrug, silently resolving to let Haruhi do as she must with the undoubtedly bewildered newcomer. That in mind, we began setting up a chess board: we could probably get in a few games before Haruhi took a breath.

It was then that I realized that only Nagato had not greeted our guest, so I looked over my shoulder, expecting to see her still reading.

To my surprise, she was not. The book was still open in her lap, with one hand marking her page, but Nagato was staring across the room at Azuma-san.

My experience with reading the subtleties of Nagato's almost imperceptible facial expressions is something I have documented in the past, and it remains a skill that gives me great pride. Because of

that, I often caught things that others might have missed. In this case, what I saw was first confusing, and then unsettling.

Nagato could win a staring contest with a statue; I am convinced of this. However, this was not one of her normal collecting-data stares, or one of her I-have-nothing-else-to-look-at stares of pure inertia. She was tracking Azuma-san's movements, and there was a tension in her face that I had honestly never seen before.

She almost looked… afraid? No, that wasn't possible. She was probably just sizing up the unknown quantity and observing how she interacted with Haruhi, and the intensity I saw was just a reflection of the energy being radiated by our leader.

I looked back at Koizumi, and saw that he had noticed it too, however. Koizumi's face is one I have a more difficult time reading than even Nagato's, but let's face it: Nagato's is nicer to look at. Honestly, of the inhabitants of this room, his is the last face I'd devote time to studying. But even he had a slightly furrowed brow as he watched Nagato watching Azuma-san. Perhaps there was something there after all.

Deciding to leave it for now, we started our first game, while Asahina-san took a seat beside me, and leaned in to get a better look. One of life's subtle joys.

By the time Haruhi finished regaling Azuma-san with tales of past Brigade exploits, Koizumi and I had finished three games, Asahina-san had refilled the tea countless times, and Nagato had yet to look away from our visitor. Finally, though, Haruhi remembered that the rest of us were there. "So!" she announced, plopping herself down in a chair next to Koizumi and motioning for Azuma-san to take the next one. "I was just discussing with Kyon earlier that what we really need is another mystery search this Sunday. What do you think, Hazuki-chan?"

The tall girl gave a hesitant smile. "Remind me which ones were the mystery searches?"

"Oh, that's the one where we all meet in the city, split up into teams, comb the area for anything mysterious, and report it back. It was the very first outside activity we had as a club! I think it would be a great chance for you to get to know everyone in the group!"

True, since she hadn't given the poor girl a chance to get a word in with any of the rest of us so far.

"It sounds like fun," Hazuki nodded, looking guardedly enthusiastic. "But, um, if it's going to be Sunday morning… would it be okay if I brought my girlfriend?"

The subsequent heavy silence was broken only by a small "meep" from Asahina-san. Finally, Koizumi cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Azuma-san, but I just want to make sure I heard correctly. Your… girlfriend?"

Haruhi rose to her feet and placed her hands on her hips. "Does anyone have a problem with that? I will *not* tolerate discrimination within the ranks of the Brigade. If Hazuki-chan has a girlfriend, that's her business." She then turned to the new girl. "That is, assuming that you're not just saying that to make the boys leave you alone?"

"Er- no, I'm not," Azuma-san said with a shake of the head. "She's going to be visiting from Tokyo this weekend, to see how I'm doing at my new school. I'd hate to leave her by herself when she's coming out specifically to visit me. I know she's not a student here, but… this sounds like the sort of thing that she might enjoy, too, so…"

"That settles it, then," Haruhi nodded, deciding for all of us as usual. Not that anyone would have voiced opposition in the first place, most likely, but… yeah, as usual. "We'll meet at the normal place. Kyon, since you know better than to hit on her now, I want you to make sure Hazuki-chan knows where that is. I'm also putting you in charge of making sure she gets home safely tonight."

I don't know whether or not to find it amusing when Haruhi throws out something so blatantly sexist as that, given how liberated she is

normally. While having a boy walk a girl home for safety's sake is as cliché as it gets, let's be real: how much added safety could I give to a double-black-belt who had twenty centimeters on me?

"That'll do it for today's official meeting, then," Haruhi said, addressing the room with a curt not. "Hazuki-chan, I think Mikuru-chan might be a little shy about changing in and out of her costume with you in the room since she doesn't know you like I do yet, so for her sake, please stay with the boys for the start of meetings. I'm sure she'll get past her homophobia sooner or later."

"My what?" Asahina-san squeaked, looking mortified.

"It's okay, Mikuru, you aren't to blame for your upbringing. Everyone is dismissed." Just like that, she turned on her heel and left the room, loudly closing the door behind her.

"I'm not..!" Asahina-san wailed, turning watery eyes toward the prospective new member. "I don't know why she said..!"

"Don't worry, Asahina-san," Azuma-san smiled reassuringly. "I promise not to behave inappropriately. I *am* in a relationship, after all."

Now if only Haruhi could learn the same…

"I'll be off as well, then," Koizumi announced, removing his pieces from the board and putting them back in their box. "Work tonight was… optional, but given how the day has gone, I should put in an appearance. Good evening to you, Azuma-san, all." He picked up his bookbag and gave us a wave as he followed Haruhi out.

Realizing that poor Asahina-san was liable to melt from embarrassment already, I gathered my things and stood. "Well, Azuma-san, it looks like I'm your escort, for all the good it will do you. Shall we call it a day?"

"Thank you," Azuma-san smiled, and for a moment I felt the tiniest pang at Haruhi's comment about me knowing better than to hit on her. Then again, it seems to be my curse to be surrounded by pretty girls who are, for one reason or another, completely off-limits to me, so I shouldn't be too surprised by this time. "I was hoping for a chance to talk with you anyway. I haven't had the chance to speak to anyone else in the class yet, honestly."

How surprising.

Leaving Asahina-san to change and lock up, I led Azuma-san down the hall toward the staircase. Standing at the top stair and blocking our progress, however, was none other than Nagato. I have no idea when she left the club room without us noticing, but here she was, staring up at Azuma-san with what was, for her, marked hostility.

"Nagato?" I asked.

"You should not be alone with her," the alien interface said simply, turning her dark eyes toward mine.

For an instant, I had the bewildering thought that Nagato might be jealous somehow. Did she really think that I couldn't be alone with a pretty girl without misbehaving in some way? This is *me* we're talking about here. Never mind that the girl with me was a self-proclaimed lesbian who could probably break my bones with a stray glance.

But that thought only lasted the aforementioned instant, because when Nagato felt it necessary to warn me of something, it was generally serious. "What do you mean, Nagato?" I asked her.

"Her presence is… dangerous."

Suddenly, all the staring made more sense. Did Nagato think that Azuma-san might be a literal threat? Still, to say this right in front of her… what could Azuma-san be thinking right now?

"We can all walk together, then," Azuma-san offered. "I believe you and I are neighbors now, Nagato-san. I saw you leaving the same apartment building as me this morning."

Nagato, to my shock and alarm, flinched at these words, and that was something I don't know if I'd *ever* seen. Rather than say anything, though, she stepped out of the way to let us pass. Azuma-san began descending the stairs, but I hesitated for a moment, staring dumbstruck at Nagato.

Something was very wrong here.

It was, without a doubt, the most awkward and tense walk home I'd ever experienced. Azuma-san and I walked side by side, with Nagato following a few meters behind. Occasionally I'd look back at her and motion her to join us, but each time she shook her head and kept her distance. Azuma-san said nothing at all, in spite of her earlier words about having wanted to talk to me, and the silence dragged until we reached Nagato's apartment building. Which, apparently, was now Azuma-san's as well.

Normally I would have said goodbye outside of the building, but I had the strangest feeling that leaving the two of them alone would be an incredibly bad idea, and anyway, I really wanted the chance to ask Nagato what was going on. The three of us got on the elevator together, with Azuma-san pressing the button for the fifth floor, and Nagato the seventh.

As the elevator dinged open on the fifth floor, Azuma-san stepped forward, but then turned to give us a slight bow from the threshold. "Thank you for seeing me safely home, Kyon-kun, Nagato-san."

Then Nagato dropped the bombshell: she said something that opened a pit beneath my feet, and made me realize that we were surely in for it yet again.

"I will not allow you to harm Suzumiya Haruhi."

Azuma-san blinked a couple of times, but rather than reply with surprise or bafflement, she nodded slowly. "I'm glad to hear that. I'm actually counting on it."

"I know what you are."

"Then you should know that your data manipulation powers can't touch me, so even if I were to try to harm Suzumiya-san, how would you stop me?"

"Repetitive blunt-force trauma utilizing any available heavy objects."

Wait, what the hell was all this?

"Fair enough," Azuma-san nodded, giving a small, wry smile. She then stepped back into the hallway, and the elevator doors began to close. "But you're still missing the point. I'm not here to harm Suzumiya-san: I'm here to save her."

The doors closed, and the elevator resumed its gentle ascent. Beside me, Nagato visibly slumped, which for anyone else would have been the equivalent of fainting dead away.

So it would appear that there was a story to be told here.

I followed Nagato to her apartment, waiting for her to speak first, which on reflection is never really the best plan. She motioned for me to follow her inside, so I did so, pausing just past the doorway to switch from shoes to guest slippers. At this point, Nagato waved me to the central kotatsu and spoke her first words since the elevator: "I will make tea."

Minutes later, she came to join me at the table, but as she poured the tea, I noticed something that filled me with a very real dread.

Nagato's hands were shaking.

Not wishing to interrupt her hospitality, I waited patiently for her to finish pouring, then took a slow sip. "Nagato," I said quietly, "who is

she, and why has she got you so rattled?"

"She claims to be Azuma Hazuki. While accessing school records from across Japan, I discovered an Azuma Hazuki who was born in the Kyoto prefecture eighteen years ago. The being who joined us in the club room today bears a strong similarity to this person, with notable exceptions. The Azuma Hazuki of Kyoto was twenty-two centimeters shorter, and suffered from moderate to severe cerebral palsy of the spastic diplegia subset, as well as clinical depression and anxiety. Moreover, the Azuma Hazuki of Kyoto ended her life via overdose on sedative medications before reaching her sixteenth birthday."

I had been about to take another drink, but I froze before the cup could reach my lips. "So… a different girl, then?"

"Negative. Analysis of hospital records and recorded sessions with a psychiatrist, compared with my own analysis of our visitor, show identical fingerprints, with voice and DNA almost perfectly matched, allowing for some error in terrestrial methods of recording and the respective health of the two subjects."

I decided not to ask how Nagato had accessed hospital records and presumably private recordings in the time we'd spent in the club room. "So… *same* girl, then?"

"Yes."

I didn't like where this was going. "Then… what is she? A ghost of some kind? Did she die with a grudge?"

"She is… human…" Nagato said, very deliberately. "However, she is a form of data not native to this space-time."

In other words?

"To simplify, she is most likely the Azuma Hazuki of another… dimension."

Ah. Of course. Well, Haruhi, you can be satisfied at last. It appears we finally got our slider.

"In addition," Nagato continued, "she possesses a form of the data manipulation power present in both myself and Suzumiya Haruhi, though hers appears to be confined to her own physical being."

"That sounds ominous. But she said she didn't mean Haruhi any harm?"

Nagato stared into space for a few moments before turning back to me. "Since my initial transmission of data regarding Azuma Hazuki, the Integrated Data Sentient Entity has been in an uproar. Several factions believe that her purpose is to eliminate either Suzumiya Haruhi herself, or her data manipulation ability. Should this take place, autonomous evolution will fail, and there will be no further need to observe this world. I will… cease to exist." She took a tiny breath, and in a voice so low I barely heard it, she added, "I do not wish for this."

"But Nagato, if they make any kind of a move against you, I'll…" I trailed off. I'll do what, exactly? I'll find Haruhi and make her fix everything, even though by then she'd be either powerless, or worse, dead?

"At this time, there is no consensus. I am to continue to observe. However, the dwelling of Azuma Hazuki, which is in this very building, is now a blind spot to the Entity and its interfaces. In addition…" There was another uncharacteristic pause before she went on. "Many of the same factions are calling for my removal as primary observer, given my increasing accumulation of error data. If a consensus is reached wherein Azuma Hazuki is to be terminated, they believe I will not be able to fulfill my role. At this time, your past negotiations on my behalf are all that have saved me from deletion."

A chill ran down my spine. The thought of losing Nagato was more than I wanted to even contemplate. But here she was, being shot at from both sides, threatened by her own kind as well as external

forces. If only there were a way to rid ourselves of the IDSE without losing Nagato in the process.

Maybe it was finally time to awaken Haruhi to her abilities after all.

"I do not believe you to be in danger from the Entity at this time," Nagato said next, drawing my attention to my own potential plight in all of this. "The vast majority of factions believe that your death would trigger a strong enough response in Suzumiya Haruhi that the universe, and with it the Entity, would be endangered. They do not underestimate her attachment to you."

"That's a relief, I suppose, but it doesn't help you much, does it?"

"I will be fine."

No, Nagato, you won't be fine. You're not even fine right now. You're *terrified* . You've learned to love your life, and you don't know how to react anymore to having it placed in a danger that's beyond your ability to control, or even *attempt* to control. You feel helpless and frustrated, and the logical part of you can't deal with these emotional responses.

The great goddess Nagato, who took a dozen spears to the chest defending me, has learned how to fear, but not how to cope with it. So many times I've counted on her to be the strong one, and the rational one, and now I couldn't do anything to help her in her own time of need.

Then again, maybe I could.

"Look," I said in as calm a voice as I could manage, "I think a big part of the problem is that we don't have enough information. Maybe we should talk to Azuma-san, and find out the rest of her story. It could be that we're actually on the same side."

"I want to believe that," Nagato whispered, and it took a few seconds for the implications of that statement to sink in. "However, there is

something about her that terrifies me beyond rational thought, and adds rapidly to my error data. To me, she is the image of the Grim Reaper, and I see no outcome from her presence save the termination of my existence. To be in her company at this time would likely trigger a cascade of errors that would necessitate my removal."

"Okay," I nodded. "Then… I'll go and talk to her, and then I'll report back to you."

Her eyes widened the tiniest fraction. "Her dwelling is impervious to my ability to observe. It appears to exist between our own time/space and another. If you enter this space, I will not be able to protect you. This is… unacceptable."

"Nagato, believe me, I know plenty about fear. I don't want you to think I'm discounting yours, but… I think she'll be willing to talk first. She wanted to talk to me earlier, remember? Let me try this."

Tough words. Shame I didn't really feel as tough as I sounded, but seeing Nagato this shattered was all the reason I needed. I guess Haruhi isn't the only one with a latent sexist streak, because when I see a girl brought so low, it doesn't matter if she's an alien superhero who can bend time and space. I still get that feeling of wanting to protect her and take care of her, even if I know how unsuitable I am for the job.

"I will… gamble on you," Nagato said at last, though she didn't look very happy about it.

It wasn't until I reached the fifth floor that I realized I didn't know which apartment would be hers. I started up the hall, looking for nameplates, but none of them said Azuma.

One of the doors, however, remained unmarked, so by process of elimination, this was probably it.

Apartment 505.

Of course. How could it possibly have been any other than this? There's no such thing as coincidence, right?

Needless to say, this did not do wonders for my already flagging confidence. I thought for a moment about calling Nagato and giving her some If-I-Don't-Make-It instructions, but she'd been through enough already. Instead, I pulled out my phone and called Koizumi's number.

After two rings, it went to voicemail. He was probably in meetings with his superiors, reporting the new addition to the Brigade. There wasn't time to wait for him to finish, so after the tone, I left a quick message. "Koizumi, it's me. If you can, I need you to come to Nagato's apartment. I'm about to do something incredibly stupid, and if you don't hear from me by midnight tonight, I need you to tell Haruhi everything, and I mean *everything* . Nagato can tell you more. Wish me luck."

I hung up, placed the phone back in my coat pocket, and took a deep breath. Well, now that I'd gone this far, I'd best see it through, right?

Rather than use the doorbell, I knocked three times on the Western-style hardwood door. The seconds dragged by, and then the door opened, revealing a bit more of Azuma-san than I had expected.

She had changed out of her Kitago uniform. More accurately, she seemed to be *in the process of* changing out of her Kitago uniform, as she was wearing a pair of hip-hugging denim capri pants, a lacy white bra, and nothing else. Well, she *did* have what looked like a red angora sweater, but it was still in her hand. Better that than a hunting knife, certainly.

Due to our difference in height, I can only say that it was a Herculean effort to meet her eyes. Damn you, Taniguchi.

For her part, she didn't look at all surprised. "I thought you might drop by. Come in."

"Um, pardon the intrusion," I said automatically as I stepped inside and doffed my shoes. There were no guest slippers, so I had little choice but to follow her to the living room in my socks. The apartment was very much in the Being Moved Into stage, with a few boxes laying about, but there was some furniture in place in the form of a small sofa, a coffee table, and a large flat-screen television which Azuma-san immediately started talking to. "Looks like it's just him," she remarked, then beckoned me over after pulling on her sweater. Not sure what else to do, I stepped closer.

A pleasant, almost musical voice came from the speakers set up to either side of the screen. "You'd be… Kyon-kun, then? It's a pleasure to meet you."

Looking out from the screen was a girl with long jet-black hair, which was decorated with a pair of red ribbons in the shape of bows. She had a sweet, charming smile, glittering brown eyes, and was wearing a burgundy mock-turtleneck that did little to hide a figure that Taniguchi would have certainly given an A to A-plus. She appeared to be sitting at a desk, and I saw several tall bookcases on the wall behind her. She was also wearing a headset microphone, like the kind online gamers use, and it was only then that I noticed the webcam sitting atop the television. She was videoconferencing. Still, given the clarity of the picture, even on a big-screen, that had to be some serious computing power.

"This is Minamoto Chikaru," Azuma-san said by way of introduction. "And yes, this is Kyon-kun." She then shot me a frown. "Or should we call you something else?"

"You may as well keep using that," I sighed. "If you don't, Haruhi will just correct you."

"Fair enough," the girl on the screen laughed. "But please, call me Chikaru. It would appear that Hazuki-chan trusts you, by the way. Either that, or she's doing a better job getting over her nudity issues than I knew."

"I was wearing a bra," Azuma-san scowled lightly. "And I still have issues: just around women. He's not a threat to me." She then gave me an almost apologetic look. "No offense meant, but you're not. Plus, I really *am* gayer than a pride parade."

"I… see," I replied, reaching around reflexively to scratch the back of my head. "So, um, Chikaru-san, are you Azuma-san's..?" I cut myself off, uncertain of the etiquette in these situations.

"I think he's trying to ask if you're my girlfriend," Azuma-san smirked at the camera.

"It's a sweet word; I like it," Chikaru-san giggled. "And I'm… one of them, yes."

One of them..?

" *Anyway*," Azuma-san went on, "Kyon-kun is the only one in the group who doesn't smell of *Souma* . It's kind of hard to tell, because with Suzumiya-san there, everything else kind of pales by comparison, but… it's definitely real in the others."

"I see," Chikaru-san nodded, steepling her fingers beneath her chin. "So… shall we send Mu-chan for this Sunday?"

"I think she'd be the best choice," Azuma-san nodded, her face twisting into another semi-apologetic look. "I wish you could all come."

"As do I, but too many transitions…"

"I know. We need to keep things quiet for the time being. I'm not sure if Mu-chan will be able to sense anything more than I can, but… she's the only other one I know of who managed to do what Suzumiya-san has done."

"Pardon me," I spoke up. "Um… I don't really know what you're talking about, but… are you okay saying all of this in front of me?"

"It's best that you know," Azuma-san said, fixing her eyes on me. "You're the one who keeps the secrets for the rest of the Brigade, yes?"

"True," I agreed, even as I wondered how she could possibly know that.

"Then you can keep ours as well. Besides, I'm counting on your help to save Suzumiya-san. You could say that I'm an advance scout, here to observe and learn what I can before we take action."

Another observer. Perfect. "So someone else wants to keep an eye on Haruhi, eh? I can't say I'm surprised. Who is it this time? An international conspiracy? A religious cult?" I waved at the screen. "A librarians' association?"

Azuma-san looked me straight in the eye. "The creator."

"…"

That was going to be my next guess.

"…"

Okay, so it wasn't.

"Are you telling me," I said carefully, "that God has taken a personal interest in Haruhi?" Congratulations, Haruhi. You've made the big time.

Azuma-san rubbed her forehead with one hand: an unexpectedly weary gesture. "Please, for all that's good in the world, don't let her hear you call her God. We'll never hear the end of it."

"But she's…"

"The creator of this world," Chikaru-san said from the screen.

"And she's… a she?"

Azuma-san crossed her arms. "Don't sound surprised. When you come right down to it, the force of creation is inherently female. Or do they not teach you where babies come from in this world?"

"You'll have to forgive my beloved for her feminist zeal," Chikaru giggled. "But yes, the creator of this world is female, as is the creator of the life within it. And we're here on their behalf… sort of."

"What does that make you?" I asked. "Angels?"

"Can you take this part?" Azuma-san asked the girl in the television. "I need something to drink."

"Go ahead, my sweet," Chikaru-san chuckled. She then turned her attention to me as Azuma-san padded toward the kitchen. "Let me start at the beginning, Kyon-kun. Do you believe in alternate realities existing concurrently with your own?"

"You… *could* say that," I nodded, crossing my arms. Were they sliders after all, then?

"Then we're off to a good start. Do you see all these books behind me? Each one of them is a world. Your world, the world I call home, the world in which Hazuki-chan was born… each of them is contained within a book, and all of these books are in turn contained in an enormous library at what you might call the center of creation. The creators live in the library and keep all the worlds safe. This is, in fact, the place from which I am calling you right now. With me so far?"

"Go on," I acknowledged, but I could not help but think of Nagato at that moment. What would *she* make of the idea of a celestial library?

"In many of the worlds - well, many by *our* standards, but an infinitesimal fraction compared to the library itself - we find certain individuals who… contain a spark of the power of creation itself. It's what's called *Souma* . Hazuki-chan and I are two of those people.

We're human beings, but… we have that echo of the creative force within ourselves."

"I think I see where this is going. So, Haruhi is our world's contribution? She has a spark of this *Souma* of yours?"

"A spark?" Chikaru-san smiled. "No, no. She has *truckloads* of it. You've seen it, surely? The power to subconsciously rewrite the world as she goes? She's inherited the role of the Maker, and of all the *Souma* -bearers that are known to exist, she is second only to the creators in sheer power."

This certainly fit in with what I knew already. "But you said that the others had this power as well?"

"Yes, and that's what's troubling," Chikaru-san nodded, her face darkening slightly. "You see… mortals with *Souma* aren't able to pass that power to other mortals. Your Suzumiya-san did, without even realizing it. She gave mental powers to Koizumi-san and his group, time-travel abilities to Asahina-san, and… we're still not certain about Nagato-san and the others like her."

"You, however, have no *Souma* of your own," Azuma-san said, stepping up beside me and offering me a cup of red tea. "There are traces of it having affected you in the past, but you don't have your own source. You're the normal one in the group, and yet… Suzumiya-san is drawn to *you* ."

"Drawn to me?" I repeated. "Isn't that a bit much?"

Azuma-san let out a sigh. "Please. Everyone in that room with the possible exception of Koizumi-kun is drawn to you, and even *he's* got a raging bro-crush. Are you *that* oblivious? What are you, the player in a harem game?"

My face felt very warm all of a sudden, so I tried to change the subject. "You keep talking about saving Haruhi. If she's so powerful, what does she need to be saved *from* ?"

The two girls exchanged glances through the screen again, and Chikaru picked up the narration. "The fact that she's that powerful is itself the danger. From what I understand, you lot have been doing an amazing job keeping her in check, but… even with all your efforts, her powers are becoming more unstable, and it's beginning to endanger this world. More than that, it could endanger other worlds as well. If it goes much further, the creator will step in."

"Step in? As in, take away her powers?"

Azuma-san gave me a look that literally made the hairs stand up on the back of my neck. "No, that apparently won't work at this stage. This particular creator doesn't do things halfway, and she doesn't take kindly to her books being threatened. If we don't figure something out, Suzumiya-san will be erased from existence, and history will be completely rewritten without her."

I stared blankly at her for a few seconds, and then so much as felt the blood leaving my face.

"I trust the implications are beginning to sink in," Chikaru-san said quietly.

Oh, they certainly were. Thinking of Haruhi ceasing to exist was… well, it was almost more than I could imagine. How could there be a world without a Haruhi in it?

But it wouldn't just be Haruhi, either. Koizumi and I would be the lucky ones: we'd just be ordinary students living out our mundane lives. But Asahina-san would never have been sent from the future. Nagato would never have been created to observe Haruhi. Or had Haruhi created the entirety of the time travelers and the Integrated Data Sentient Entity in the first place, meaning that neither of them would exist either? Was this why Nagato had freaked out after meeting Azuma-san? Could she see this coming?

Haruhi had grown powerful enough that God saw her to be a threat. As ludicrous (and even funny) as that sounded on its own, I didn't

feel much like laughing.

"Tell me something, then," I managed. "You say that Haruhi is in danger from the creator him- er, herself."

"Correct," Azuma-san nodded.

"And… you *work* for the creator?"

"Mostly on our summer and winter breaks," Azuma-san snorted.

"I believe I see your concern," Chikaru-san grimaced. "One thing we may not have made clear is that there are *two* creators in play here. The first one… let's just call her the Maker…"

Azuma-san sighed loudly. "Let's just call her Lilith and get it over with."

Chikaru-san raised an eyebrow and gave the other girl a half-smirk. "Very well. Lilith was the one who created the worlds themselves. The author of the books, if you will. The second creator…"

"Let's just call her Eve and get it over with."

"… Indeed. Eve is the one who brings life to the worlds. Lilith is the author, but Eve creates the characters."

Another nod from Azuma-san. "And Eve doesn't want to see Suzumiya-san come to harm, if it can be at all avoided. Which is what brings us here. That and the fact that Suzumiya-san is… well, she's one of us, even if she doesn't know it, and we try to take care of our own when we can."

"To be fair," Chikaru-san added, "Lilith doesn't want to see Suzumiya-san come to harm either, but she has to act for the sake of creation as a whole, so she's giving us this chance to set things right."

Lacking anything to add at the moment, I stalled by taking a sip of the tea I'd been given. It had cooled off somewhat, but it was remarkably good: I don't know that I'd ever tasted the like.

"Well, if that's that, I should make sure we can find Mu-chan," Chikaru-san smiled. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Kyon-kun."

"Give my love to Tamao," Azuma-san smiled at the screen, that hard face looking unexpectedly wistful.

Chikaru-san cocked her head to one side, as if listening to something outside our hearing. "She says to tell you that she'll be reading along for a bit, so if you wanted to, say, give her a striptease, she'd be happy to return the favor once we're home."

"Tease," Azuma-san muttered, but she was smiling.

I drank the rest of the tea in a vain attempt to stop any of the inevitable mental images from forming.

"Oh, and Kyon-kun?" Chikaru-san added. "She also says to tell you that your friend Koizumi-kun has been trying repeatedly to reach your mobile for a few minutes now. I'm afraid the calls won't come through until you leave Hazuki-chan's apartment."

"Thank you," I said with a small bow. "I should let him know I'm okay. It was nice to meet you as well, Chikaru-san."

"I'll be in touch," she winked, and then the screen went black.

Azuma-san took my empty teacup and set it on the coffee table, then began ushering me toward the door. "I trust we can count on your cooperation?" she asked.

After taking a moment to put my shoes back on, I gave her as even a look as I could. "Look," I sighed. "Even with everything I've seen, I've still got a skeptical streak a mile wide. Even assuming that everything you've just told me is true, what do you intend to…" I

broke off, realizing that now might not be the time for skepticism. Nagato's earlier reaction verified the story of Azuma-san being from another world, and the way this had spooked her was proof enough that something serious was afoot here. "How can we stop this from happening?" I asked instead.

Azuma-san looked away for a moment. "We don't know yet, but that's what I'm here to find out about, and that's why Mutsumi will be here on Sunday to help me." Her eyes found mine again, and her gaze seemed to carry actual physical weight. "As happy as Suzumiya-san looked today, there's some… darkness inside that she's hiding, and it's making her powers unstable. That, in turn, makes this book unstable. We need to find out what it is, and we need to do it in a way that won't light the powderkeg."

True enough. Haruhi had nearly destroyed the world once already. I remember it well: I was there at the time.

"Can I tell Nagato and the others about this?" I asked.

"It would spare me having to do it again, so sure," she half-smiled. "You seem to be good enough at keeping secrets from going further than they need to. And if you can, please tell Nagato-san that I'm on your side. I don't mean any of you harm."

"I'll tell her, Azuma-san."

"Oh, and one other thing. You can go ahead and call me Hazuki."

I nodded slowly. "Hazuki-san, then. Tell me, though… this darkness you see in Haruhi. Do you have any ideas?"

She gave me a thoughtful look. "Have you ever asked Suzumiya-san about her sister?"

The question was more or less a non-sequitur, so I just blinked at her for a few seconds. "Haruhi's an only child," I said at length. "She's

even said to me that she envies me for having a sister. She's never had one of her own."

Hazuki-san nodded as she opened the door for me. "And that, right there, could very well be the heart of the problem."

To be continued

AUTHOR'S NOTE: Please consider this a Proof of Concept. I have a lot of other stories I need to work on before I can continue this one, but I needed to strike this idea while the iron was hot. I hope this can provide entertainment even for Haruhists who have no idea that *Yami to Boushi to Hon no Tabibito* even exists, much less that some doofus named Suzume has been writing stories in that setting. Thank you for reading!

Chapter 2

Part 2

In case you're wondering, the reason Haruhi gave for my usual treat-everyone-to-lunch penalty that Sunday was that I was the last to arrive at the usual meeting spot, even though I was technically on time. ("We could have started early if it hadn't been for you!")

Not that she needs a reason anymore, really, and to be perfectly honest, I'm resigned enough to the inevitability of it all that I no longer feel the need to ask for one. Aside from which, my attention was on Haruhi's potential new recruit, as well as said recruit's companion.

Her name was Otohime Mutsumi. She was twenty-two years old and a student at Tokyo University, after having succeeded on her fourth attempt at the entrance examination (her previous attempts having been marred by such mishaps as passing out due to her longstanding anemia, or in at least one case simply forgetting to sign her name on the test). She came from a large family in Okinawa, and had a fondness for watermelons (which her family grew in great quantities), as well as turtles (whose speech she claimed to be able to understand). She lived in a sort of hotel-turned-dormitory with a number of other people, including two childhood friends with whom she'd made a promise to attend Todai together. She was a Pisces, but didn't believe strongly in astrology unless it already agreed with what she knew to be true. She preferred white tea to green on the whole, but occasionally liked to indulge in a good, strong, British-style Earl Grey, which she tried for the first time at age thirteen after hearing it referred to on *Star Trek* . She was an excellent bowler, and had a love for ballroom dancing which was somewhat hindered by her occasional tendency to faint against her partner.

I learned all of this in maybe the first ten minutes after meeting her. You see, along with all of this, Mutsumi-san was easily the most comfortably forward person I'd ever met, and like Koizumi, had no sense of personal space whatsoever.

Mind you, sharing personal space with her was an entirely different (not to say more pleasant) experience, even as unnerving as it was considering that we had just met. She was one of those perpetual eyes-seemingly-closed smilers whose facial expressions are given in text messages with a pair of upward-pointing carets (^^), and her face itself was flawless, with the possible exception of her eyebrows, which were a little on the thick side. Her brown hair fell in loose waves to about mid-back, with a pair of pronounced forward-facing *ahoge* which actually seemed to move with those eyebrows as though somehow attached. On the rare occasions that she opened her eyes widely, they were a deep, mesmerizing brown that matched her hair. She was wearing a pastel yellow sun dress, and…

How shall I put this? I'm a heterosexual male teenager, so I'm going to notice these things. It's in my DNA.

She had the largest breasts I'd ever seen in my life, at least in person. Larger than both the younger and older Asahina-san. As trite as it is to say that a woman is "curvy in all the right places" (making one wonder what the wrong places are - on the soles of the feet, perhaps?), Mutsumi-san fit the hourglass-figure archetype as perfectly as anyone. She may not have been the Platonic ideal of femininity, but she was a lot more than just a shadow on a cave wall, that much was certain.

I don't know why, but I was actually finding myself extremely taken aback by this.

Well, maybe I do know why after all. Even after meeting the also very feminine Chikaru-san during the video-conference in Hazuki-san's apartment, and finding out that she was "one of" Hazuki-san's girlfriends, I guess I expected someone a bit more… male.

I'm sure I'll get grief for this at some level, but I have a confession to make here that will probably upset some people. All I can say is that I'm sorry, we can't all be as progressively open-minded as you no doubt are. Cut me some slack: I can only adjust so much at a time.

I just don't *get* homosexuality. At some level, it still just creeps me out, and I don't know if it's just because I don't swing that way, or if it's because I'm a product of my environment, or what. I suppose it might also be at least in part due to the presence of a certain esper who seems to delight in making me squirm with his occasional yaoi-flavored teasing, but whatever.

One of the things I have always had difficulty understanding, though, is the way that gay couples seem to invariably fall into a male/female dichotomy, with one of the partners either being a limp-wristed fairy-man or a short-haired, husky-voiced woman wearing jeans and a man's shirt. If by some accident of genetics (or whatever it is) I had turned out to be the sort of man who was attracted to men, wouldn't it make sense to look for someone who wasn't trying his hardest to act like a woman? And vice-versa for women: what's the point of being a lesbian if you're going to seek out a woman who's as manly as possible?

So in retrospect, I think what unsettled me here was the fact that Hazuki-san and Chikaru-san (and now Mutsumi-san) did not fall into my expectations for what a lesbian relationship "should" look like, even if the way it "should" look was something of an annoyance to me. I suppose if someone put a gun to my head and asked me who was the "man" in the relationship, I'd have to go with Hazuki-san, both for her height and the fact that she was again wearing pants (though again, they were tight-fitting capris that accentuated her hips something fierce). However, having seen Hazuki-san with her shirt off (and doesn't *that* feel strange to say), I can assure you that she's pretty damned feminine herself: the image of that lacy white bra she was wearing will be burned into my memory forever. While it's obvious enough that she's hiding some significant muscle tone somewhere, she's sleek rather than ripped. No washboards here.

Now, for those who want to flay me alive for my lack of sensitivity concerning people different from myself, I will at least say this: having them blow my expectations out of the water did at least get me thinking about why I might have had those expectations in the first place. Like I said, I'm a product of my environment, and I can only adjust so much at a time. I'm working on it.

I have since learned that an American comedienne once said that asking who is the man and who is the woman in a same-sex relationship is like asking which chopstick is the fork, so I'll try to keep that in mind.

As is often the case, we drew lots for the first round of the search. In the end, I found myself grouped with Asahina-san and Koizumi, while Haruhi and Nagato were to be in the company of our guests. Needless to say, I found myself more than a little nervous about this, given what Nagato had previously said about her feelings of instability in Hazuki-san's presence, but Nagato herself seemed to have returned to her normal levels of calm. In addition, Mutsumi-san seemed to have taken quite a shine to our resident data interface, and unless my watching-Nagato skills had gone completely out of calibration, Nagato actually seemed to be enjoying the older woman's attention. Well, maybe *enjoying* is too strong a word, but it seemed to go somewhat beyond mere tolerance.

Aside from which, if Nagato thought it would be dangerous to be in their company, surely she would have rigged the draw in her favor somehow. Unless, of course, Haruhi was doing the same. Or unless Nagato's perceived need to protect Haruhi was outweighing her concern for her own well-being…

We split up to begin the search, and I was so distracted by the new additions and my concern for Nagato that I didn't even have the presence of mind to cherish the fact that I was getting to spend time with Asahina-san outside of Haruhi's presence…

"Well, then. What *shall* we talk about?"

… or to dread the fact that Koizumi would certainly use this time to deliver a lecture of some sort. Well, at least the answer to the question was easy enough: surely we were going to talk about Haruhi, and the latest threat to reality as we know it, right?

"Perhaps it's a bit early to consider our otherworldly visitors a threat," Koizumi smiled in his normal fashion. "Though it's curious: as taken as Suzumiya-san has been with Azuma-san, she seems far less at ease with…" He paused and gave a wry chuckle. "I can't bring myself to call her Mutsumi-san, I'm afraid, her own insistence notwithstanding."

"She certainly is very… forward," Asahina-san nodded, echoing my sentiments. "For a moment, there, when we first met her, I could have sworn she was leaning in to kiss me."

I consider it a credit to myself that my eyes did not glaze over at that mental image. Yes, I know I was just going on about not understanding homosexuals. Yes, I know I am a hypocrite with a double standard. Deal with it.

"Maybe that's part of it, then?" I posited. "Haruhi's so used to being the self-assured one that she doesn't know how to react when she meets another personality like that?" Not that they were the same, certainly: while Haruhi was forward in the same way as a charging bull, Mutsumi-san had a more elliptical, gentle approach, so that you barely noticed that she had become the center of the scene until well after it had happened. More to the point, Mutsumi-san didn't seem to notice she was doing it either. Was it a natural college-girl thing?

Asahina-san had started to blush very slightly, and looked reluctant to say what she was about to say. "Um… you know, in spite of what Suzumiya-san said before, I'm really *not* a homophobe. In my time we don't really worry about that sort of thing. I'm not sure why she said that, really…"

Perhaps because you didn't take kindly to being continually stripped and molested by our brigade chief?

"But I wonder," she went on, "if maybe Suzumiya-san might be a little put off now that she's seeing two women who are an actual couple? Maybe she's less comfortable with it than she lets on?"

Koizumi gave a knowing laugh. "Or perhaps you're both ignoring the obvious conclusion."

Okay, if it's so obvious, go ahead and share. I'm sure you will anyway, so get on with it.

"Surely our leader has quickly fallen in love with Azuma-san, and thus sees Otohime-san as a threat. It makes sense, doesn't it?" He then shot me a wink, and I will thank him to never do that again. "So perhaps you should step up your game."

The conversation came to an abrupt halt. After a long pause, Asahina-san found herself enough to gasp. "Do you mean it?"

It certainly didn't feel *impossible* . There had been that comment of hers which I had recently unearthed, about how she was only looking for someone interesting, boy or girl…

"Actually, I'm just kidding," Koizumi said, smiling more broadly. "Think nothing of it; it was only a joke."

Something else I will thank him to never do again, but I won't hold my breath.

However, his expression quickly darkened, and lost a bit of its practiced nonchalance. "I will say this, though: while I do not believe there are any romantic complications as such, I can assure you that Suzumiya-san is indeed ill at ease in the presence of Otohime-san. Not to the point where I shall need to excuse myself and visit a closed space… at least, not yet… but there is something there beyond mere jealousy or a personality conflict."

"She seems so nice, though," Asahina-san objected. "And… it may sound silly, but… right when she was introduced to me, she took my

hand, and… it felt… really *comforting*, like I was meeting an old friend after a long absence. It was as though I'd known her all my life somehow." Her face then flushed again. "Not enough that I wanted to be kissed, though. That would have been embarrassing."

Asahina-san, you really *should* be more careful with the images you place in a young man's imagination.

"Yes, Otohime-san is very tactile, I've noticed," Koizumi nodded. "She did the same to me, and like you, I'm certain I felt something. It was not completely unlike the feeling I get when I activate my powers in closed space, though on a much smaller scale."

I didn't recall feeling much of anything when she took *my* hand during the introductions. Other than the fact that hers was very soft and warm, and that I hadn't expected the contact.

"This does give credence to the story Azuma-san and her friend told you, though," Koizumi went on. "Perhaps if our powers all come from a common source of creative energy - the *Souma* of which they spoke - that would explain why we feel a sensitivity to it while you do not. Moreover, perhaps that would explain the opposite reactions that Suzumiya-san and Nagato-san have had to our visitors."

I was starting to see his point, but as usual, he seemed to be taking great pleasure in drawing out the story so he could bask in his own brilliance for a while longer. Get on with it, please.

"Think of a bar magnet with two poles," he explained. "Positive repels positive and attracts negative. Suzumiya-san is drawn to Azuma-san, but repelled by Otohime-san. Nagato-san is repelled by Azuma-san, but seems more at ease with Otohime-san. Perhaps Otohime-san and our fearless leader are a form of positive energy, for lack of a better term, while Nagato-san and Azuma-san are attuned to negative energy. Strictly in a metaphorical use of the words, of course."

"That makes sense, I suppose," Asahina-san said thoughtfully. I could tell by the look on her face that she was wondering where she might fit into that bar magnet analogy.

"Saying that Nagato was just *repelled* by Hazuki-san doesn't seem strong enough, though," I pointed out. "Nagato seemed convinced that Hazuki-san's presence in this world was going to somehow lead to her death."

"So you've mentioned," Koizumi nodded gravely. "While Suzumiya-san's reaction has not been so severe as that, I would be lying if I said it did not concern me. If she somehow senses Otohime-san as a threat, things could spiral out of control in a hurry…"

Analogies of positive and negative energy aside, it could not be denied that Haruhi looked a little surly during the break between searches, though in a very non-Haruhi way, she was making an obvious effort to disguise it with a mask of false cheer. Normally Haruhi never bothered to keep a lid on her annoyance: I can only assume that she did not want to lose her potential new recruit so soon.

It came as little surprise, though, that upon the next drawing of lots, Haruhi was teamed off with Koizumi and Asahina-san, leaving Nagato and the self-described sliders with me. I was a bit relieved, to be honest. It had been difficult not to worry about Nagato after the wholly uncharacteristic fear she had displayed the other night, and it was comforting to see that she was more or less back to her normal self.

The two groups split off again, and once we were a safe distance, Mutsumi-san started the conversation with a small giggle. " *Ara ara*, now *that* was certainly interesting."

Interesting?

She turned a sunny smile on me. "Suzumiya-san does not like me *at all*," she elaborated, though by her expression, she did not look offended in the least.

"Dear God, I hope she's not crushing on me," Hazuki-san sighed.

"Yes, you do get that a lot, don't you?" Mutsumi-san giggled, pulling herself closer to the other girl in a brief sideways hug.

I suddenly flashed back to the conversation in Hazuki-san's apartment, where Chikaru-san had described herself as "one of" Hazuki-san's girlfriends. "So, uh… how long have the two of you been together, then?" I asked, uncertain of the protocol in such things. That seemed a safe enough question to start with.

Mutsumi-san laughed and reached over to give my arm an effortlessly friendly squeeze. " *Ara*, bless you, Kyon-kun. Hazuki-chan and I are just good friends. I'm not part of her harem."

"It's not a harem," Hazuki-san said in a voice that hinted that she'd explained this before. "I have two girlfriends. Two. That's called a threesome, not a harem."

"Yes, and it's absolutely the sweetest thing to see them all together," Mutsumi-san went on, still speaking to me. "You've met Chikaru-chan already, I understand, and Tamao-chan is simply the cutest little thing. They complement one another very well. I hope you get the chance to meet all three of them, so you can see it for yourself. I envy them, truly."

Hazuki-san was making an obvious effort not to blush. "I keep telling you, Mu-chan, it's worth the effort to make it work. The sooner that Keitaro-san and Naru-san figure out how much they need you, the happier you'll all be."

"Mmm, maybe," Mutsumi-san grinned, once again holding one of Hazuki-san's arms to herself and leaning in closer to the other girl.

"But in the meantime I get to have the *very* enjoyable experience of playing the part of your girlfriend for a day."

There was the buzzing of a phone, and Mutsumi-san paused to take hers from her pocket and check the display. She laughed for a moment, then held it out to show me.

TAMAO.S]: Please don't bury yourself in the role, Mu-chan.

"Sorry, Tamao-chan," Mutsumi-san said to the general area as she pocketed the phone.

We continued our walk, and I found myself at least a little surprised that the rest of us were more or less following Nagato, who had not yet taken part in the conversation, or indeed even acknowledged us. In retrospect, I should have realized that this was strange even for her, but at the time, I suppose I was too distracted by other things. No, I'm not talking about Mutsumi-san's cleavage. Much.

"I may regret asking this," I said then, "but why do you think that Haruhi dislikes you?" I went on to give a stripped-down version of Koizumi's theory about magnetic poles and how it might relate to their energy.

" *Ara*, your friend is very astute," Mutsumi-san smiled.

"He's wrong, mind you, but that's a pretty good guess," Hazuki-san added.

"Yes, you see, my energy and Suzumiya-san's are actually quite complementary in nature," Mutsumi-san went on, "and Hazuki-chan's is a third form that complements us further."

"Remember what Chikaru said the other night about Suzumiya-san having inherited the role of the Maker?" Hazuki-san asked me. "Mu-chan and I represent the other two roles."

I looked at Nagato, who still had her back turned to us as she walked slowly forward. Where did she and the others fit in?

"That's the curious part," Mutsumi-san considered. "From what I can sense, all of them…"

"Maybe we should wait to talk about this part?" Hazuki-san interrupted her. "You wanted to go over this with Eve and Lilith to be sure, didn't you?"

" *Ara*, yes," Mutsumi-san nodded, shooting an almost guilty look toward Nagato before turning her normal eyes-closed smile back toward me. "At any rate, if I were to guess, I would say that Suzumiya-san is uncomfortable with me because I remind her of someone she has been trying very hard to forget."

Something in that last exchange set me ill at ease. What had Mutsumi-san been about to say, and why had Hazuki-san stopped her? Was there something I wasn't allowed to know? Or were they keeping something from Nagato?

Speaking of Nagato, it came as no surprise at this time to find that she had led us to the library, and the familiarity of the location gave me a brief, warm feeling that partially dispelled any apprehension I might have had. If I still needed any evidence that Nagato was back to her old self, here it was.

Or so I thought, anyway. It's amazing what hindsight can do, isn't it?

To my surprise, however, the library was closed, with a sign hanging on the door explaining that there had been flooding damage from a burst water pipe, and it would be re-opened as soon as possible. So much for familiar surroundings.

Then, to my surprise, Nagato held her hand to the door, and I heard a *click* as it unlocked at her touch. Without looking back at us, she opened the door and stepped inside.

"Oi, Nagato!" I called, hurrying in after her. "We really shouldn't be here. Someone might call the police if they see us."

Nagato said nothing, and simply kept walking toward the center of the main floor, while Hazuki-san and Mutsumi-san followed us inside and closed the door behind them. The library was deserted, and the dank, musty smell in the air combined with several sections of ripped-out carpeting gave evidence to the flooding damage mentioned on the sign. A few bookcases had been emptied and dismantled, their contents loaded onto carts and tucked between other shelves.

Finally, in the midst of the couches and chairs of the central "reading area" of the bottom floor, Nagato stopped. I called her name a couple of times, but there was no response, so I circled around in front of her to try to catch her eyes.

Her eyes… which were completely unfocused, with nothing more than a tiny ring of color around her dilated pupils. To my horror, her face had gone ashen, and there was a flickering tension in her features, making her look as though she were having a nightmare while standing there.

"Nagato!" I called, even as I felt my heart speed up with fear.

With slow, painful-looking movements, she turned to look up at me with those nearly black eyes, and when her voice came, it sounded half a world away. "Thank you," she whispered. "Now… please… run."

And then she collapsed.

I dropped into a crouch beside her, shouting her name, but with a speed I would never have guessed she possessed, Mutsumi-san was suddenly there as well, kneeling and pulling the fallen girl's head into her lap. In moments, Nagato was laid out supine on the library floor, and Mutsumi-san had a hand to each side of her head, her palms over the smaller girl's cheeks.

"Tamao-chan, talk to us!" Hazuki-san called out as she scanned the room, as though looking for an enemy.

I looked Nagato up and down, then, and if my heart had sped before, it positively stopped at what I saw next. Nagato was dissolving. Her feet and lower legs were coming apart into innumerable tiny particles of white light.

She was being erased.

There was another buzzing sound, and Mutsumi-san pulled her phone from her pocket with one hand while leaving the other against Nagato's cheek. "This was a trap of some kind. Nagato-san is under attack."

"Can we pull her to the Library?" Hazuki-san asked, which made no sense to me. Weren't we already *in* the library? "She has *Souma* . She should be able to cross over."

"Tamao-chan says she's being blocked somehow," said Mutsumi-san. She set the phone nearby so she could keep reading it, then put both hands to Nagato's face again, and a soft green glow spread from her hands until it encased Nagato's body.

"Do you know what's going on?" Hazuki-san asked me.

"Her data link has been terminated," came another voice, then. A sweet, charming voice that filled me with nothing but dread. The last time I'd heard it, I'd been lying in the street, blood pouring from a knife wound in my side.

From behind one of the bookcases, still wearing a Kitago uniform, stepped that creature from my nightmares: Asakura Ryōko. Former class president, interface from a radical faction of the Data Entity, and complete psychopath.

She gave me a friendly smile as I rose to my feet. "Hello again, Kyon-kun," she said with a giggle. "You know the drill: this area is

now under my data jurisdiction, so it would save us a *lot* of trouble if you would just cooperate."

Cooperate? And let myself get stabbed again?

"Oh, you misunderstand," Asakura beamed. "I'm not here for *you* this time. The Entity has no desire to see you come to harm, given the effect it would likely have on Suzumiya-san. The primary objective of my mission is to ensure that Nagato-san will give us no further trouble." She then put her head to one side, giving me an almost regretful look. "She fought, you know. You have no idea how hard it was to get her to lead you to a place where there would be no witnesses. For some reason she insisted on dying *here:* something about wanting to the see the library with you one last time." Her normal cold smile returned. "No matter, though. The Entity has no place for such sentimentality. It will be purged with the rest of her."

"Don't do this, Asakura," I said with more confidence than I was feeling. "Has the Entity forgotten? If anything happens to Nagato, I'll tell Haruhi everything, and we'll get her to rewrite the universe without you if that's what it takes to get Nagato back." I realized that I was practically asking to be killed at this point, but if the Entity really wanted me alive that badly, maybe this playing of my trump card would make it reconsider.

I felt a cold, clenching feeling inside as Asakura smiled more widely and let out a rippling laugh. "Oh, Kyon-kun, that's so cute." She then drilled into me with her ice-cold eyes. "Do you really think that little threat of yours held any weight with the Entity? Do you really think *you* were the one who saved Nagato-san from deletion last December? I'm sorry to disappoint you, but she was allowed to continue functioning because the consensus believed that her disappearance would have a negative effect on Suzumiya-san… though perhaps not as great an effect as yours would have caused. We have now reached the point where this is considered an acceptable risk when compared to the prospect of leaving Nagato-san in place." There was no smugness or superiority in her face as she said this, and somehow that made it worse. "As for your threat?

By the time we finish altering your memories, you'll have no idea that you ever said such a thing. We'll allow you to be sad that Nagato-san had to return to her people, but I can assure you that you won't find yourself inspired to take action."

I didn't know whether I wanted to throw up or pass out. After all this, the trump card I'd been holding had turned out to be a deuce.

"Now," Asakura went on, turning her attention to the others, "Otohime-san, is it? I must ask you to stop trying to interfere."

Mutsumi-san mirrored Asakura's smile with one of her own, and for a moment I was struck by how similar they looked. " *Ara ara*, I'm very sorry, but you *must* realize that I won't do that."

"Yes, but it seemed polite to ask first before stopping you by force," Asakura laughed.

There came the sound of metal against leather, and suddenly Hazuki-san was drawing a katana from its sheath. (Now, where exactly had she been hiding *that?*) "You must *also* realize that I won't let you do that," the dark-haired girl said in a low, threatening voice.

"Actually, I was counting on that," Asakura smiled. "After all, my *secondary* objective is to kill *you*, Azuma-san."

AUTHOR'S NOTE: What do you mean, where have I been?

Otohime Mutsumi, Narusegawa Naru and Urashima Keitaro are from *Love Hina* by Ken Akamatsu. Sometimes you just need an OT3.

Next time! The Obligatory Haruhi Fanfic Battle With Ryōko Asakura (collect them all!), and more crossovers than you can shake a stick at!

Chapter 3

AUTHOR'S NOTE: This story is set before the introduction of the Anti-SOS Brigade in the latter books of the series. (Mostly because I started this thing over a year and a half ago and hadn't read those books, but also because… wow, that would have been a lot of characters to deal with…)

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Part 3

Immediately after stating her intention to kill Hazuki-san, Asakura leaped forward in a blur, an all too familiar gleam of metal in her right hand. Hazuki-san did her best to dodge the attack, but she was not quite fast enough, and there came the horrible sound of metal slicing through something.

There was a soft *thump*, and something dark hit the floor. On one side stood Asakura, her hunting knife held ready, and on the other side stood Hazuki-san, who to my relief appeared uninjured. But then what had been the sound I'd heard?

A look at the dark mass in the floor was my answer. Hazuki-san had been wearing her thigh-length hair in a long, loose braid today, and while she had indeed managed to escape injury, Asakura's knife had sliced more than a meter of that braid away.

Hazuki-san looked at her severed length of hair, then looked back at Asakura. Her eyes darkened.

"You really shouldn't have done that," she said in a voice which made it very clear that, pardon my language, shit just got real.

What followed was a fight for the ages. When Asakura had fought Nagato, there had been energy beams and glowing shields, but this

was a knock-down drag-out melee of sword versus knife, punctuated by wild leaps, tumbling rolls and impossible dodges. Hazuki-san's sword was glowing green now, much as Mutsumi-san's hands were, and Asakura was grinning from ear to ear, obviously enjoying this chance to cut loose against someone.

Forget John Woo. Forget The Matrix. This was a level of combat I don't think I'd ever witnessed, and the fact that it was strictly hand-to-hand only intensified it. I wondered for an instant why Asakura didn't use any of her powers to gain an advantage, but then I remembered what Hazuki-san had said to Nagato, about data manipulation powers being unable to touch her. Either way, Asakura didn't much seem to care that she was going to have to do things the old-fashioned way.

"Kyon-kun," said Mutsumi-san from close by, "I'm afraid we have more company."

I chanced a look down at the older girl, who was still holding Nagato's head in her lap. Whatever Mutsumi-san was doing with *her* powers, it was not stopping Nagato from dissolving: her legs were mostly gone now, and the area around her hips was beginning to shimmer and fade. However, an outline of the rest of her body still remained, in the form of the green glow which had originated from Mutsumi-san's hands.

Wait a minute. What did she mean, *company?*

"Kyon-kun," came yet another voice, "please step aside."

I whirled to see another Kitago-uniformed girl, this one marked with very distinctive pale green hair: Kimidori Emiri, another of Nagato's fellow IDSE interfaces. For a moment, I felt a surge of hope. Was she here to stop Asakura?

"Kimidori-san," I began, but then I felt my tongue seize up. I was paralyzed again, just as I had been when I was first attacked by Asakura all those months ago. Kimidori waved her hand, and an

invisible force shoved me out of the way, leaving no one between her and Nagato.

"Oh, hello there," Mutsumi-san smiled up at the green-haired girl. "I suppose you're here to stop me as well, then?"

"I am sorry, Otohime-san, Kyon-kun," Kimidori said gravely. "I wish it had not come to this, but consensus has been reached, and Nagato-san must be terminated. Either cease in your attempts to interrupt the process, or I will stop you by force."

" *Ara ara*, I'm sure you will," Mutsumi-san replied, her smile not wavering for an instant. "I was wondering, though. Do you think you could do me the kindness of giving me just a few seconds more?"

"What for?" Kimidori demanded.

"Well, to say goodbye, of course," Mutsumi-san rambled on. "I've become very fond of Nagato-chan in the short time I've known her, you see, and besides, that should give Tamao-chan enough time…"

A crack appeared in reality, directly between Kimidori and Mutsumi-san, and a dark form emerged from it at a run, landing a crushing left hook to Kimidori's face and literally sending her flying several meters back.

"… to punch through your wall and send reinforcements," Mutsumi-san finished happily. "Much obliged, Kaname-chan!"

My paralysis faded the moment the new arrival struck Kimidori, leaving me to stare dumbstruck at our latest slider. She was a tall, slender woman maybe a year or two older than myself, dressed in a tight black midriff-baring crop-top, leather pants, and low-heeled boots. Her hair was short and black, and she carried a katana of her own in her right hand. Unlike Hazuki-san, she was not at all lacking in muscle definition: while she was not the least bit bulky, she was certainly further to the right on the sliding scale of sleek versus ripped when compared to her fellow swordswoman.

To my shame, my first reaction upon seeing this Kaname-san person was: "Now *she* looks more like a lesbian." Thankfully, I was too stunned to say this out loud.

Kimidori had gotten to her feet by this time, though there was something *very* wrong with her face. Rather than a bruise where she had been struck, there almost appeared to be a chunk missing from the area of her cheek, leaving a soft green light shining from within. "What in the world *are* you people?" she gasped at Kaname-san.

"Hmm, let's see," Kaname-san smirked. "Your worst nightmare? Your ass on a platter? Your horrible slashy-slashy death? Yeah, let's go with that one." She then lunged forward and swiped at the interface with her katana. The attack barely grazed the front of Kimidori's uniform, but there was a shower of green sparks, and Kimidori cried out in what sounded like genuine pain.

Kimidori made a desperate sweeping gesture with one arm, then, and a cart full of books came streaking in from nowhere and plowed into Kaname-san, pinning her to one of the still-intact bookcases. "Asakura!" she shouted in as loud and forceful a voice as I had ever heard from her. "We're leaving! *Now!* "

"Sorry, Kimidori-san!" Asakura giggled, still deeply engaged in her duel with Hazuki-san. "The mission isn't complete yet, and I'm having *far* too much fun to stop now!"

"Asakura, the consensus has spoken! *Abandon the mission!* " Still leaking energy from her two wounds, Kimidori opened a hole in the data space and disappeared through it, leaving not a trace behind her.

As soon as she was gone, Kaname-san pushed aside the cart that had been pinning her in place, then charged into the thick of the fight with Asakura. "The hell, Hazuki? You can't take out this little girl on your own?"

"Yeah, about time you showed up!" Hazuki shouted back at her.

"Two on one, then?" Asakura laughed, and now there seemed to be a hint of genuine madness in her voice. "Very well, I'll play!"

"Kyon-kun," Mutsumi-san said to me then, as the two warriors traded blows with the blur that Asakura had become. "Please take my phone and call out any messages that we get. I need to give Nagato-san my full concentration."

"Right," I nodded, scooping the phone from the floor and checking the screen. The latest message read:

TAMAO.S]: Kaname st&ndi#g by. Ten s** nds to force ^ hole in !he bar(#er.

Even as I watched, though, a new message appeared, this one slightly clearer than the last.

TAMAO.S]: Hello, Kyon-san. Ryofu st%nding by. Five more s*conds.

"Ryofu standing by, five seconds!" I relayed.

"Some nerve!" Asakura laughed. "Hacking my data-space *and* outnumbering me? You don't play fair, do you?"

Another crack appeared in the scene, and another figure stepped out, this one a woman with a messy halo of dark pink hair, including a pair of back-swept *ahoge* that surpassed Mutsumi-san's. She was dressed in a tank-top, jeans and work boots, and the weapon she carried…

Well, how shall I put it? It was a blade on a stick, but calling it a naginata would be like calling *Amanohashidate* a shoal. Would it be better to call it a halberd? A giant pole-axe? A monstrous bringer of the aforementioned slashy-slashy death?

Whatever it was, she nearly beheaded Asakura with it on her first try. Harried by three enemies now, the psychotic alien was starting to pull out a few more stops, using her powers to fling around books,

chairs, even entire shelves. Maybe she couldn't affect them directly with her abilities, but it obviously wasn't stopping her from using every advantage she could come up with.

The phone buzzed again, and I tore my eyes from the fight and checked the screen.

TAMAO.S]: Still cannot rem8ve Nagato-san safely. It's easier to force entr& into this space than eXit. Rushuna st#nding by as soon as I can for4e another way in.

I knelt beside Mutsumi-san. Nagato was gone all the way to her chest now, but I could still see a faint outline of the rest of her body. It reminded me of the way they used to depict invisibility in cartoons, where they would use a white line drawing in the outline of the invisible creature. Here, though, the lines were forming a sort of Nagato-shaped shell, and inside that shell was a soft green light, much like that which had been exposed when Kaname-san had attacked Kimidori.

Was this Nagato's energy, then? Was Mutsumi-san somehow holding onto her essence, even as the body was stripped away?

Another buzz from the phone.

TAMAO.S]: Rushuna in about fifteen seconds.

I was about to call this out, but then it occurred to me: why give Asakura the warning? Instead, I said it quietly enough so that only Mutsumi-san could hear. She gave a nod and a soft smile, but said nothing more. Her eyes were closed now, and there was a tension in her face that had not been there before. Obviously it was taking everything she had to do… *whatever* it was she was doing for Nagato. I only wished I could do something more to protect them at this point. How long would it be before the increasingly chaotic fight disrupted her concentration? We were out in the open, with no cover.

An idea struck, and I hurried to retrieve the cart which had earlier pinned Kaname-san to the nearby bookcase. It wouldn't provide much cover, but it would be better than nothing.

As I began wheeling it over, there was another crack in the scene, and yet another woman stepped through.

Now. How shall I describe Rushuna-san? She was a golden-eyed woman with long, equally golden-blonde hair which was partially covered by a wide-brimmed straw hat. Her outfit consisted of a pink top with an impossibly low collar, as well as a white vest-like wrap that was fastened at her navel. Her white skirt was slit so far up the right side that I could see the edge of the string-tied panties she was wearing (the same pink as her shirt), and she had knee-high boots that put me vaguely in mind of a cowgirl. Adding to that bastardized American West image, she carried what looked like a modified nineteenth-century revolver in her right hand.

But again, I am a teenage male, so all of these details were somewhat ancillary to me in the end.

Do you remember how I said that Mutsumi-san had the largest breasts I had ever seen in my life? That was because I had not yet met Rushuna-san.

"Hmm, it looks like someone brought a gun to a knife fight!" Asakura shouted from the middle of the whirlwind. "Well, two can play at that game! I'll achieve my first objective, at least!" She swept her left arm in a wide arc, sending furniture and shelves crashing into her three attackers and momentarily knocking them back.

To my horror, I saw another flash of metal, this time in Asakura's left hand. I don't know where she'd been hiding it, but now she had a handgun as well. And she was pointing it right at an oblivious Mutsumi-san. I hadn't been fast enough with the cart: I'd never get it between them in time.

It was then that time seemed to slow to a crawl. I saw the muzzle flash as Asakura fired, but at the same instant, Rushuna-san dropped into a crouch and fired as well. There was a brilliant spark of metal against metal, then another shot from Asakura, then another shot from Rushuna-san, and then a second spark and the sound of metal impacting metal.

Rushuna-san was literally shooting Asakura's bullets out of the air.

By this time my mind was going far faster than my body, and even as I tried to muscle the cart full of books closer to Mutsumi-san to give her some small amount of shelter, I realized that I only had about four shots' worth of time to do it: Rushuna-san's revolver probably only held six bullets, and the pistol carried by Asakura looked modern enough that it probably contained a clip of ten or more - I don't know a lot about guns, but I am continually amazed at what buried knowledge will spring to mind when you're under this level of stress.

A third shot was fired, and a fourth, both impossibly picked out of the air mid-flight. I still had several meters to go. Would the books sufficiently absorb the impact of a bullet anyway? Sorry, Nagato. I know how fond you are of books, and I hate to see them get ruined in your presence, but this is for your own good.

A fifth shot and a sixth, again brought down by the latest slider's impossible marksmanship. I wasn't going to make it.

Do you remember what I was just saying about the way stress can bring out knowledge you didn't even remember you had? It seems to work that way for perception as well: during moments of peril like these, I find myself noticing sometimes incredible levels of minutiae. That in mind, I will try to properly sort out and relate exactly what happened in the next few seconds.

After firing her sixth shot, Rushuna-san reloaded. As simple as this sounds, I would be remiss if I did not give this the description that such an eye-popping event deserves. By *reloaded*, that is to say that

she popped open the cylinder of her revolver and dumped out the spent shells, then in one fluid motion, she arched her back and bounced her considerable chest, causing six fresh bullets to literally fly up out of her equally considerable cleavage, and then she *caught them in the open chambers of the revolver's cylinder* before snapping it back into place. Elapsed time, maybe two seconds.

Unfortunately, this came a second after Asakura fired her *seventh* shot, and neither Rushuna-san's improbable reloading technique nor my final push would give Mutsumi-san the protection she needed.

Fortunately for us all (except perhaps herself), Hazuki-san provided that cover instead. Emerging from behind an overturned couch, she threw herself in front of Asakura and took the shot pointblank. I couldn't tell exactly where it hit her, but a bloody exit wound erupted from her upper back, and a dark stain immediately began to spread across her sweater.

In the same lunge, though, Hazuki-san brought her katana down in an arc that seemed to leave a trail of light behind it, and ensured that Asakura would not have time for an eighth shot by cutting off the alien's left hand at the wrist. Like Kimidori had done a short while ago, Asakura gave a cry of what sounded like actual pain as she drew back the stump of her wrist, but rather than blood from the wound, all that was visible was that same green energy.

Hazuki-san went down face-first on the floor at the completion of her attack, and since this was the moment that I finally got the book cart to where I wanted it, I immediately turned and started toward her. I'm not sure what I was thinking, really: how much help could I legitimately provide here? Gaping chest wounds are not exactly within my realm of expertise.

Before I could take more than a step or two, however, Kaname-san and Ryofu-san appeared on the scene, pressing their advantage against the stunned Asakura. The fight was brutal and one-sided, and I was not quite able to avert my eyes in time to *not* see Ryofu-

san literally bisecting the girl with a slash that split her from left shoulder to right hip.

There was a rustle of fabric and a smell of perfumed soap from close by, and when I looked up again, I saw that Rushuna-san had positioned herself in front of me, her revolver still held at the ready. After a few seconds in which nothing happened, she shot a brief, heart-melting smile over her shoulder at me before stepping closer to where Asakura had fallen. Still operating on shock alone, I followed her.

Hazuki-san was, incredibly enough, still moving, even though it looked as though most of her blood was now on the outside of her. With Kaname-san's help, she dragged herself over to Asakura's… well, head and torso, which were lying there semi-intact in spite of the rest of her having begun to dissipate into white specks.

For her part, Asakura was still smiling, albeit knitting her thick eyebrows in an expression that hinted at confusion. When she saw Hazuki-san looming above her, though, she gave a sheepish sigh. "Oh, you're still alive, then? When you jumped in front of me, I thought I might *at least* have been able to complete my *secondary* objective. What a shame."

The scene was not nearly as grisly as I had expected, as Asakura did not have a speck of blood on her (except for that which was now dripping from Hazuki-san onto her uniform shirt), and even though she had been literally cut in half, all that was visible from the wound was, again, a soft green glow.

No one is more aware than I that an alien interface can bleed: after all, I'd been splattered with Nagato's blood quite thoroughly in the past. I suddenly remembered the look of shock Kimidori had given Kaname-san after receiving a similar injury, and found myself echoing the girl's thoughts: who *were* these people, that could deliver this kind of damage to the IDSE's data constructs?

Hazuki-san dropped clumsily to Asakura's side, then with the hand that wasn't buried in her gunshot wound, she grabbed the blue-haired girl by the neck and began to squeeze. There were several sparks, and then smoke started to rise from where they were touching. Asakura's eyes went wide again, and she gasped. "Oh. That… rather hurts."

"So you're made of data, right?" Hazuki-san said in a damp wheeze. "You're probably backed up on some kind of hard drive or cloud storage somewhere, then?"

"In a manner of speaking, yes. Would you kindly remove your hand? It's quite uncomfortable."

"So will you be able to report to your superiors even if this body dies?"

"I already *have* reported to my superiors, actually. This was an *amazing* wealth of new data!"

"Good," Hazuki-san smiled grimly. "Then I won't feel bad about doing *this* ."

Again, I didn't quite look away in time. Hazuki-san squeezed, but rather than snapping Asakura's neck, it would be more accurate to say that she *burned* through it, decapitating the alien quite handily. Pardon the pun. Or better yet, allow me the pun: I have this thing about making jokes to cover moments of abject horror. Everyone needs their defense mechanisms, I guess.

Even as the rest of Asakura began to dissolve into energy, Kaname-san and Ryofu-san helped Hazuki-san back to her feet, each taking one of her arms over their shoulders, while Kaname-san applied pressure to the other swordswoman's wound. "Not copping a feel, I promise," the short-haired girl smirked.

"Why am I always the one who gets my ass kicked in these things?" Hazuki-san sighed.

"Because you have this thing about taking the hits for everyone, dumbass," Kaname-san explained patiently. "Maybe you need to switch from tank to DPS." It was here that I noticed that Kaname-san had not escaped the battle unscathed: she was sporting a wicked-looking slash across the abdomen, but it didn't seem to be bothering her much. A closer look at Hazuki-san showed that she had not gotten away without a few slices either. The only one who appeared completely untouched was Ryofu-san.

"I don't know what pisses me off more," Hazuki-san growled as they helped her over to where Mutsumi-san was still kneeling. "First she cut off my hair, then she shot me in the boob."

"Yeah, we'll get you back to the Library so Chikaru can kiss it and make it better, then," Kaname-san chuckled.

Mental… images…

"And anyway, shouldn't you be more worried about the pierced lung?" Kaname-san went on. "Tamao, are we clear to start pulling people out of here?"

Mutsumi-san's phone, which I had transferred to my back pocket while retrieving the book cart, buzzed again, so I pulled it out to check for a reply.

TAMAO.S]: The area around you has returned to normal. We can start as soon as you're ready.

I relayed this, and then Kaname-san nodded. "Good. Pull your girlfriend out first, then."

"No, don't," Hazuki-san said, shaking her head. "Nagato-san first. Mu-chan, how is she?"

By this time we had returned to the spot where Nagato had fallen a seeming eternity ago. I felt a chill run down my spine as I looked down at her and saw that her body had completely disappeared,

leaving only that green shell of energy that Mutsumi-san was somehow holding together.

"I'm afraid this is all I can do," Mutsumi-san said quietly. "If I let go now, she'll completely disperse, and I don't dare pull her into myself." She opened her eyes and gave Hazuki-san a somewhat glazed smile. "I think this one will take a little bit of divine intervention."

"Fair enough," Hazuki-san nodded. "Tamao-chan, take the two of them first, please. I'll be fine."

"I'll look after her for now, Tacchan," Rushuna-san added, this being the first she had spoken since her arrival. She guided the other two to help Hazuki-san onto an intact couch, then sat beside her and pulled the taller girl's face into her massive chest.

" *Hellooooooo*, nurse," Kaname-san grinned. Hazuki-san appeared to say something in reply, but her voice was muffled (for obvious reasons), and as I watched, both she and Rushuna-san were covered by a soft glow, much like that which Mutsumi-san had projected over the fading Nagato.

The phone buzzed again.

TAMAO.S]: I see Rushuna is being Rushuna again. Bringing Mu-chan and Nagato-san in five seconds.

A few seconds later, as promised, the entire area around Nagato and Mutsumi-san filled with light and dancing green sparks. Then there was a feeling of warm wind, and the light faded, leaving the room empty where they had been moments before.

It was at that moment that the sheer magnitude of the situation hit me: Nagato's life was literally in these people's hands.

"So, you'd be Kyon-kun, then?" Kaname-san asked, giving me an appraising look. "Good on you for not fainting. Do you see this sort of thing often, then?"

Not usually to this intensity, perhaps, but… yes, I suppose I *have* seen my share.

"Well, while our fearless advance scout is getting a little sexual healing here…"

"There doesn't have to be anything sexual about a hug to the bosom," Rushuna-san smiled.

Kaname-san continued as though she had not heard. "… I guess introductions are in order." She indicated herself, then the other two. "Kenjō Kaname, Tendō Rushuna, Ryofu Hōsen."

" *Yoroshiku!"* Rushuna-san chirped. Other, more *prominent* physical assets aside, she really *did* have an amazing smile…

" *Ni hao,"* Ryofu nodded. These were *her* first words since her arrival, and I could not help noticing that her expression had not changed once. Apparently Hazuki-san's team had a Nagato of its own.

At this point, Hazuki-san gently pulled herself away from Rushuna-san's embrace, and the glow faded. "Thank you," she said to the blonde woman, then cleared her throat and turned her gaze onto the other two. "We need to get the rest of you out of here," she said in a stronger voice. "Unaware of her powers or not, Suzumiya-san is bound to notice this many new *Souma* presences. As soon as things are clear upstairs, the three of you need to get back to the Library."

"What about you?" Rushuna-san asked. "I've barely started healing you, Hacchan."

"I'm stable," Hazuki-san assured her. "I need a couple of minutes with Kyon-kun, and then I'll be right behind you.

"Are you sure you're okay?" Kaname-san asked, crouching by the side of the couch and checking Hazuki-san's injury.

"I'm stable," Hazuki-san repeated. "Tamao-chan? Are we clear to vacate?"

Tamao-san sent a message affirming this, which I relayed. Moments later, the other three women began to shimmer with green sparks and fade out. "Nice to have met you!" Rushuna-san waved cheerfully as she vanished.

There was a brief silence, save for the sounds of the city outside: noises which had been missing while we had been trapped in Asakura's data-space. I hoped no one would choose that moment to look into the library's windows. I seemed to recall that they were reflective-tinted from the outside, but still…

Hazuki-san took a deep breath, then made as though to rub her hands over her face. Upon seeing how bloody they were, however, she wiped them on her pants instead. "I need to get back to the Great Library," she sighed.

"Do you know what's going to happen to Nagato?" I asked her, pointblank.

She shook her head. "I'm sorry, but I don't. From what Mu-chan said, that's going to be up to the goddesses. I'll do what I can to convince them to help, though."

"Thank you," I nodded, feeling a churning in my stomach at the idea that these efforts to save Nagato might have been for nothing.

"Meanwhile," she said, "I need you to get back to Suzumiya-san. Tell her… tell her that Mu-chan collapsed from her anemia, and that Nagato-san accompanied us to the hospital to make sure we'd be okay. Tell her that I said it was probably nothing to worry about, and that I'll see her at school tomorrow. We'll figure the rest out later."

"I'll tell her."

Hazuki-san reached out as though to give me a pat on the shoulder, then stopped as she realized once again that her hands were still a little bloody. She settled for giving me a weary smile instead. "I saw what you tried to do there, with the book trolley. Thank you for that."

Not that there was much I could do in a battle between half a dozen superhumans, of course.

"The point is, you tried," she said, the smile widening just slightly. "So… thank you."

"Um, you're welcome."

She took another deep breath and let it out slowly. Apparently whatever Rushuna-san had done to her had at least sealed her lung. "Can you come to my apartment at seven tonight? And bring Asahina-san and Koizumi-san as well? I should be back by then, and we'll have a better idea of what's happening with Nagato-san."

It would take a bit of explaining to my parents, but I could always pass it off as a study session with Nagato. "I'll be there."

"Good, good," she nodded. "I'll be off, then. See you tonight. Tamao-chan, if you please?"

After the call to her invisible girlfriend, Hazuki-san also began to glow green, and then she was gone as well, leaving me alone in the decimated remains of the library.

Which, it suddenly occurred, would not be the best place to be discovered right now.

There was a vibration in my hand, and I realized that I was still holding Mutsumi-san's phone. Checking the display, I saw that it was an incoming call this time, and the phone brought up a picture of a smiling teenage girl with blue-black hair and violet eyes. I clicked the button to answer and held it to my ear. " *Moshi moshi?"*

A soft voice appropriate to the picture replied. "Hello, Kyon-san? My name is Suzumi Tamao. I'm the one who's been sending you messages."

"Suzumi-san, yes. Nice to, um, meet you."

"I thought it would be easier to tell you this part by voice. I'm going to need to undo the damage to your library, and it would be best if you're not there when I do it. I've unlocked the delivery door in the back, and there's no one there to see you right now, so I think it would be best if you got out that way."

"Ah, thank you," I said, heading back behind the main desk and looking for the way to that exit. An odd thought occurred to me then, and I gave it voice before I could think otherwise. "Pardon me, Suzumi-san?"

"Yes?"

"You seem very well connected with what's been going on. Can you see… *everything* that's happening down here?"

"Oh, no, not at all," she laughed. "I'm not *that* good yet. No, no, your world, like all the others, is a very complicated mixture of literally billions of stories. You could say that I'm just reading along with the one that involves you right now."

"I see," I said, somewhat relieved to know that there wasn't some extra-dimensional teenage girl watching me 24/7. Having another teenage girl with subconscious control over reality was bad enough; learning *that* in addition might have pushed things into downright ridiculousness.

By this time I'd found the delivery door. As promised, it was unlocked, so I slipped outside and onto a currently deserted back street. I then heard the door lock behind me with a *click* . "There we are," Suzumi-san sighed. "I should get on with it now. Do you have anything else you need to ask me first?"

"Um, no, I don't think so. Unless you could tell me the secrets of the universe?"

I had intended it as a joke, but Suzumi-san replied in all seriousness. "I'm still learning those myself, I'm afraid. I'll have to get back to you. Before I go, though? Thank you, Kyon-san."

"For what?"

"For helping Hazuki-chan, and for looking after her."

Looking after her? How much "looking after" had I actually done?

"It may not seem like much, but I'm glad she has someone in that world that she can trust. This would all be a lot harder without someone like you being there, Kyon-san. Also…" and here I could almost hear her blushing, "… she means the world to Chikaru and me, so… thank you again for all you're doing. Rest assured that *we'll* do everything we can for both Nagato-san *and* Suzumiya-san."

"I'm glad to hear that," I said, somewhat surprised to feel a smile coming on. "You're welcome, then, and thank you as well, Suzumi-san."

"Signing off," she said softly, and then the call ended.

After placing the phone back in my pocket (figuring that I could return it to Hazuki-san this evening), I headed back toward the main street, and nearly ran right into Haruhi as I turned the corner.

"Kyon!" she said, startled. She looked like she'd been walking quickly, if not running: Koizumi was at her shoulder, but Asahina-san was lagging behind, panting for breath as she tried to catch up.

"Haruhi!" I said, usefully. "What are you doing here?"

She actually looked surprised at the question. "I… just had the strangest feeling that something weird was happening over on *this* side of downtown," she said, fighting a blush as she explained

herself. She then narrowed her eyes at me. "Why are you by yourself?" she shouted. "Where's Yuki? Where's our new recruit?"

"Calm down, calm down," I said, holding out both hands palm-first. "I can explain…"

Next: The group reconvenes at Hazuki's apartment, where more questions will be asked, and some unsettling answers will be given.

(Let's see… Haruhi Fanfic Cliche List. Reappearance of Asakura, check. Incapacitation of Nagato, check. Crossover with Yamibou, Strawberry Panic, Koihime Musou, Love Hina and Grenadier, check. - Wait, you mean no one does that one anymore? Hmm.)

Chapter 4

Part 4

Haruhi took the lie more easily than I thought she would, though she did give me some flak for not accompanying them to the hospital myself rather than "making Yuki do it." Of course, then Koizumi nearly screwed the whole thing up by suggesting that we all head over to check on them, but Haruhi nixed that idea right out of the gate. She said that it was because she was confident in Nagato, but I think it was far more likely that she was still not comfortable with Mutsumi-san.

Even though I was relieved that she chose not to follow that suggestion, I couldn't help noticing that she looked conflicted, as though she knew that she should be concerned for the older girl even if she didn't like her very much. I chose to look at this as a positive.

From there, the weekend Mystery Search drew to an unceremonious close, with Haruhi dismissing us to go about our business. This gave me the chance I needed to brief the other two about the recent events in the library, as well as Hazuki-san's request to meet at her apartment that evening. Asahina-san was practically beside herself at the news of what had happened to Nagato, and even Koizumi looked unnaturally grim. Nonetheless, he promised to arrange for us to be picked up for the evening meeting.

And thus, after eating dinner and rapidly excusing myself for the "study session with Nagato," I found myself in a familiar taxi, with Arakawa-san driving, Koizumi in the passenger's seat, and Asahina-san and me in the back. We were dropped off in front of Nagato's apartment building at 7:00 pm on the proverbial dot, and I called upstairs to apartment 505. Hazuki-san buzzed us in, and upstairs we went.

She greeted us at the door, and to my relief she was a bit more fully dressed than the last time I had seen her here, wearing black skinny jeans and a wine-red mock-turtleneck very similar to the one Chikaru-san had been wearing the other night. She looked none the worse for our interesting afternoon, without so much as a limp as she escorted us into the living room, where she had set out some snacks on the coffee table in front of the sofa. "Have a seat on the couch, please. Chikaru will be calling in a few moments. Kyon-kun, would you mind helping me with the tea?"

Asahina-san and Koizumi bowed politely in thanks before taking their seats, and I followed Hazuki-san into the kitchen. In spite of having been in a pitched battle hours before, she honestly looked no different than the day we had met her. (The visible part of her left leg was still bandaged, but that seemed to be a constant with her.) Seeing her look the same as always was actually a bit unsettling.

That was when I put my finger on *why* . "Hazuki-san… did your hair grow back?" I asked.

"Yes," she said simply. She was wearing it loose tonight, and it fell in a vivid black curtain almost all the way to her knees.

"How did that happen?" I asked.

"Trade secret," she said with the tiniest smirk.

"I… see," I nodded, reaching to scratch the back of my neck. "Er… and what about..?" I went on, gesturing lamely toward the spot of her gunshot wound.

"Completely healed up," she nodded, putting a hand to her chest. "Didn't even leave a scar. Want to see?"

She said the last part in such a normal, conversational tone that it took a second or two before the thought properly registered, and I felt my face turn bright red. Hazuki-san held her innocent expression for a few seconds more, then snorted with laughter. "Sorry, Kyon-

kun. I may be as gay as the day is long, but that was too easy for even *me* to pass up."

Ah. So embarrassing men isn't just for straight girls, then. Good to know. Desperately willing my skin to return to its normal color, I took a small tea tray from her and brought it out, then took my seat on the sofa, so that Asahina-san was sitting between Koizumi and myself. After we had each sampled the tea (the same red tea she had served me at my first visit), Hazuki-san turned to the flat-screen television in front of us and called out "Chikaru, are you there?"

The screen immediately lit up, and once more, there was Chikaru-san sitting at a desk positioned in front of a set of bookcases. "Good evening," she smiled. "Nice to see you again, Kyon-kun. These must be your fellow brigade members, then?"

We made introductions, with both Koizumi and Asahina-san standing to bow to the television. It was all pleasantries at this stage, but now that we were here and settled, I was beginning to grow impatient.

"Chikaru-san," I said at the first opportunity, "can you tell us about Nagato? Is she…" I couldn't bring myself to ask the rest. Alive? Was that so hard a word to say?

"I'm sorry, of course you'd want to know that right away," Chikaru-san nodded. She then took a breath, and I suddenly felt very nervous. "Nagato-san is… recovering. Mu-chan was able to hold her energy together long enough, and we… prevailed upon the goddesses to help her."

"It was a combination of calling in a favor and appealing to their good sense," Hazuki-san said from behind us. She had remained on her feet, and was slowly pacing at the rear of the couch as she sipped her tea.

"Thank you, Minamoto-san," Koizumi nodded. "We're very grateful to hear that."

"Can we see her?" I blurted out.

Chikaru-san blinked a few times, then briefly looked to someone outside the picture. "Of… course," she said slowly. "Though I must warn you… she may still be in a bit of shock. This was a rather traumatic experience for her, I'm guessing, and she's… still adjusting."

As well-disposed as I might have been toward Chikaru-san after our overall pleasant first meeting, I was starting to feel like she was hiding something from us, and I didn't like it at all. "May we see her, please?" I insisted.

"Of course," Chikaru-san said again, smiling more kindly this time. "I'll take you to her."

That said, Chikaru-san appeared to reach around the edges of the screen, and the view jostled suddenly. I quickly realized that she had been communicating with us via a laptop computer, which she was now picking up and carrying.

The way she was carrying it, though, meant that the camera was pointing straight at her… well, let's just say her torso. Asahina-san blushed and looked away, and even Koizumi calmly averted his eyes. For her part, Hazuki-san let out a low, slightly evil chuckle.

"And what are you laughing at, my love?" came Chikaru-san's voice. She then seemed to realize what was happening, as she sighed and turned the laptop around, making the picture spin drunkenly for a moment. "You're incorrigible," she scolded, but it was obvious that she was smiling.

"Guilty as charged," Hazuki-san nodded.

The gently rocking picture took us along a stretch of stone-tiled floor with tall bookcases to either side, and then into a more open area. It was at this point that we saw Nagato: she was standing at a gently curved railing, and had her back to us. Rushuna-san was standing to

one side of her, and Mutsumi-san was at the other, with one hand resting upon Nagato's over the top of the railing. Nagato was dressed in her school uniform, and it took me a moment to wonder where they had gotten one for her.

Upon seeing Chikaru approach with the laptop, Rushuna-san smiled and stepped aside, allowing Chikaru to bring the video feed to Nagato's side. "Nagato-san?" she said quietly. "I have your friends on the line."

The picture tilted upward until it focused on Nagato's face, in profile. She was staring into the distance, her eyes wide and her mouth slightly open. The look of shocked amazement on her porcelain-doll face was odd enough, but I felt my heart in my throat as I saw the trail of tears from her visible eye.

My next reaction was anger, and I wanted to stand up and demand to know who made Nagato cry. This feeling passed quickly, however, as I realized the magnitude of what I was seeing.

It wasn't that Nagato was *crying* . It was that *Nagato* was crying.

I heard Asahina-san's tiny gasp from beside me, so I knew that I was not alone in my amazement. "Nagato?" I called.

Her pale face slowly turned to look at us. "It's… beautiful…" she whispered, in a tone of voice I was certain I had never heard from her, even in that other world where she had remade herself as a normal girl.

"What is, Nagato?" I asked her. "What's beautiful?"

She turned to look back into the distance, and Chikaru-san helpfully turned the laptop-mounted camera to follow her gaze. For a moment, I didn't see what she was referring to, but then something in the video feed adjusted, bringing the picture into perfect clarity.

Have you ever been to a multi-level indoor shopping mall, where all the stores ring a central open area, so that if you're standing on any one level, you can look out into the middle and see every other floor above and beneath you? That was the first thing I could think of to compare this scene to. The railing at which we were "standing" continued in a wide circle, probably a hundred meters across, and by looking either above or below one could see endless levels stretching into the darkness, with double-helix spiral ramps connecting one to the next. The wide, open atrium in the middle was not empty, either: huge crystals and bits of what looked like broken Greek pillars hung suspended in midair, spinning in a slow orbit around the center point.

As amazing as all of this was, however, it was once I looked past all of this that I realized the source of Nagato's shock.

On every level, upward and downward, every visible surface was lined with bookcases, or hallways leading to more bookcases, each and every one of them filled. Thousands… no, *tens of thousands* of books just within the picture alone, never mind how many more levels there might be, or how far each level's shelf-lined hallways might extend. Distantly, I remembered Hazuki-san referring to The Great Library, and Chikaru-san's assertion that each individual book was an entire world in itself. All of us, everything we knew, everyone who ever lived, from the tiniest grain of sand to the most distant galaxy, was contained within the covers of *one* of those tiny shapes lining the shelves.

Haruhi had once told me that finding herself in the crowd at a baseball stadium had made her truly realize how small an individual was in this world of ours. If she could see this now… how small our entire world was compared to this place at the center of creation…

After a few moments, the picture slowly panned back to Nagato. She was still staring unblinking as tears slowly rolled down her cheeks, though I certainly could not blame her for being awestruck: she had found something very much like Heaven… and it was a *library* .

"Nagato," I said quietly. "Are you okay?"

She did finally blink then, and turned back to look into the laptop's screen. "I am," she said softly, her voice hinting at surprise at her own observation.

"You should be able to return to your friends soon, Nagato-san," came Chikaru-san's voice from off-camera. "Once we're convinced you'll be safe, you can go whenever you're ready."

"Thank you," said Nagato with a tiny nod, her eyes focusing at a point above camera-level. "Right now, though… I would like to be alone for a while." She then looked back at us, and for the tiniest moment, I thought she was going to smile. "I'll see you soon."

The picture jostled, and there was some murmured discussion between Chikaru-san and the other two sliders. I didn't catch all of it, but it sounded like she was asking Mutsumi-san to join her for the remainder of this call, while Rushuna-san said she would give Nagato some space, but would be close by if needed. After a return trip down one of the many shelf-lined passages, the laptop was returned to its desk, and this time both Chikaru-san and Mutsumi-san pulled up chairs to join the conference with us.

"As I said, I'm afraid she's still in a bit of shock," Chikaru-san said in an apologetic voice.

"I daresay I can see why," Koizumi spoke up then. "Your library is quite the spectacle."

"Well, it's hardly *ours*," Hazuki said with a wry chuckle.

"It's more than that, though," Mutsumi-san went on. "You see… this is Nagato-san's first time inhabiting an actual body."

"What do you mean?" Asahina-san asked. "She's always had a body, hasn't she?"

Mutsumi-san shook her head. "Not as such. I could tell the first time I took her hand. She was something very human- *like*, down to every last blood cell and body system, but the body itself was never truly *alive* . When the Entity severed her data link, what it really did was remove her ability to manifest in a structured form."

"From what we can tell," Chikaru-san continued, "for most data entities, that would have been the end. The energy would disperse and be reabsorbed, and the data of that interface's experiences and memory would still be stored somewhere within the Entity itself."

"But you stopped them from taking that energy back," I said, directing this at Mutsumi-san.

"Yes," Mutsumi-san nodded. "But only because it was *hers*, and not the Entity's."

There was a pause. "I'm not certain I understand," Koizumi said, echoing my own thoughts.

"What I'm trying to say is…" Mutsumi-san started, then stopped and furrowed her brow. "How shall I put this? When she was created, Nagato-san was part of the Integrated Data Sentient Entity. She and the other interfaces were beings of pure energy given form, but they were merely extensions of the Entity: facets of a hive-mind which was still, in a very real sense, a single being."

"And the energy that makes up the Entity and all of its terminals," Chikaru-san continued, "is *Souma* . Specifically, Maker *Souma* . The very energy that Suzumiya-san carries in great quantities."

"That's why we were able to harm them directly when we fought," Hazuki-san said from her place behind us. "Because Kaname, Ryofu and I are living beings with *Souma*, our energy was shielded from their ability to manipulate, but theirs was right out there in plain sight where we could disrupt it with our own. They had no choice but to use brute force." She then laughed softly to herself. "Of course, if I'd

known that *then*, I would have put my sword down and just tackled her. Live and learn."

"But going back to Nagato-san," Mutsumi-san said, taking up the narration again, "somewhere along the line… she changed. The Nagato-san that I met when I took her hand this morning was not merely the extension of a larger entity: she was an individual, with her own thoughts, her own wishes…" She paused as if considering whether or not to say her next words, then did it anyway. "You could say that she had her own *soul*, separate from the Entity.

"Her error data," I whispered.

"So you're saying that Nagato-san… evolved?" Asahina-san ventured.

Mutsumi-san nodded. "So it appears."

Koizumi laughed softly. "My goodness. For all the Data Entity's quest for autonomous evolution, they were too short-sighted to realize that it was happening right in front of them."

"What does this mean for Nagato, though?" I asked. "Is she still a part of the Entity?"

"No," Chikaru-san said with a shake of her head. "The Entity severed ties with her when they cut her link, probably assuming her raw energy would be reabsorbed in its pure form, purged of what they considered to be 'bad data.' Luckily, Mu-chan was there to stop that from happening." She smiled at the girl sitting next to her, and Mutsumi-san returned it with a rather bashful smile of her own.

"Then what is she now?" Koizumi asked. Perhaps… an individual form of the Data Entity?"

"No," Chikaru-san said again. "She was no longer in a state that could manifest a body on its own. That's where the goddesses stepped in, specifically Eve." She closed her eyes and said the next

words carefully. "Nagato-san has been given a new body. A *human* body. She is now a true flesh-and-blood living being, albeit one who contains *Souma* ." She opened her eyes again to look back at the rest of us. "As you might imagine, this transition has been traumatic for her, but we've been helping her as much as we can."

"When she decides she's ready to return," Mutsumi-san said then, "she'll probably need all of you more than ever. Please do your best for her."

It was hard to imagine the omnipotent Nagato truly needing anyone, to be honest, but what they were saying made sense: if Nagato's entire life had been spent as part of a hive-mind, what would it be like for her now, her head filled with silence save for her own thoughts? How… *alone* would she feel?

Koizumi ended up being the next to speak, as I could not piece two words together. "Thank you very much for helping her, Minamoto-san, Otohime-san. I find myself concerned when giving consideration to what the Entity might attempt next, however. Would they strike at Nagato-san, now that she is move vulnerable? Or might they attack Azuma-san again?"

"We're assessing the risk now," Chikaru-san nodded. "That is to say, Tamao-chan is. It might be too much to say that she has the Entity *cowed* at present, but it certainly seems extremely wary of her after that last encounter."

"That's our girl," Hazuki-san nodded, giving a satisfied smile.

"More than that," Chikaru went on, "it knows now that there are people who can hurt it directly, including Hazuki-chan and now Nagato-san." She smiled maliciously, which was something I had yet to see on that face. "From what Tamao-chan can tell, this was the first time that the Entity felt itself being metaphorically hit on the nose by a rolled-up newspaper, so it may give us some peace for the time being at least. We don't believe it had ever felt *pain* before, so it's in a bit of shock as well." Her expression then soured slightly. "That

being said, as much as we hate to propose such a thing, would any of you object if we had people keeping close tabs on your book at all hours? I realize it seems like a horrible invasion of privacy, but we'd like to be able to send you help right away in the event that the Entity or anyone else decides to act against you."

So much for my relief at not having a teenage girl watching over me 24/7.

"I… I don't mind, actually," Asahina-san ventured. "I'm sort of used to being monitored, so it's okay."

"If you feel it is best," Koizumi nodded, though he looked a bit more guarded. I wondered briefly what it would be like to be a member of a secret organization and finding yourself dealing with beings who could lay all those secrets bare.

"Kyon-kun?" Chikaru-san asked, snapping me out of those thoughts.

"I suppose there isn't much choice," I sighed. "I'll just get dressed in the dark for a few days. Might as well *pretend* I have some privacy."

Hazuki-san snorted with laughter again. "If it makes you feel any better, Kyon-kun, neither of the girls on book duty would be likely to peep on you. Wrong side of the Kinsey scale."

Of course. Was being a lesbian one of the job requirements for this serving-the-goddesses line of work?

Asahina-san shot me an alarmed look, and I realized I'd said that last bit out loud. Damn you for failing me, Inner Voice!

To my surprise, Hazuki-san merely laughed, and Chikaru-san and Mutsumi-san exchanged curious glances. "Happily bisexual, myself," Mutsumi-san said, as though it were nothing.

"Rushuna's straight, isn't she?" Chikaru-san asked.

" *Ara,* her husband certainly seems to think so," Mutsumi-san replied.

"She's our token," Hazuki-san nodded sagely.

Right, then. I'd taken us off course; it was my duty to put us back on it again. "Did you discover any more about Haruhi's instability?" I asked.

Thankfully, this question served its intended purpose. "Partially, though it's a complicated thing to explain," Mutsumi-san began. She then looked slightly off-camera. "Tamao-chan, you'll correct me if I say anything incorrect?"

There was no reply from Suzumi-san, wherever she was, but Mutsumi-san nodded nonetheless and turned back to us. "Picture an onion. It has many layers, each fitting around the previous one. What's been happening in your world is that Suzumiya-san, along with altering things in the here and now, is constantly creating new worlds on top of your own."

"Such as the closed spaces," Koizumi nodded.

"Yes, including those," Mutsumi-san affirmed. "Your organization has been dealing with those for some time, and for the most part you've been doing a great service for the stability of this world. Even so, however, those closed spaces don't just go away after you collapse them: they leave behind residue, if you will: a broken, incomplete world that cannot be seen or felt, but which still exists as another layer of the onion."

Koizumi had brightened a bit at the "great service" comment, but the rest of it seemed to bring him back down to Earth. Again, I wondered how it was that they knew so much about his organization and their activities. For that matter, they had always seemed to know a little bit too much about *all of us* . Then again, if our world truly existed within the pages of a book, had Suzumi-san or someone else simply been reading back? If so, the implications were… *frightening*, to say the least. Who was reading my life's story while I wasn't looking?

"The closed spaces are just the beginning, however," Mutsumi-san went on. "There have been times when Suzumiya-san's power has made a copy of the entire world and dragged everyone into it. It looks as though there was even a period last summer where she copied and re-copied the world…" she briefly looked away, presumably for confirmation from Suzumi-san, "more than fifteen thousand times, was it? Right, more than fifteen thousand. Each of those worlds lasted for two weeks, and then she made another. The remains of each of those worlds still exist, each one another layer, and…" Mutsumi-san frowned. " *Ara ara,* Now I wish I hadn't used an onion for a metaphor, because my point is that the world is starting to collapse under the weight of all these added layers."

"Think of it as stacking wooden blocks, maybe," Chikaru-san offered. "If there are only four or five blocks, one atop the other, it's still fairly stable. The more blocks you add, though, the less stable it will be, until finally there's a collapse. This could have dire consequences for your entire world, and that's why we're here. We need to try to find a way to stop this."

"Before Lilith decides playtime is over and takes the blocks away," Hazuki added in a grimly amused tone.

"So we've been traveling from one world to another, and didn't even know it?" Asahina-san asked. She then looked from Koizumi to me. "That might explain why I wasn't able to contact my superiors last August: if we were in a completely different *world* somehow…"

Asahina-san might have missed the exchanged glance between Chikaru-san and Mutsumi-san, but I didn't. "That's partially correct," Chikaru-san said, "but you never actually left your book. It was a world within the world, if you will. A layer, like Mu-chan said."

"So Suzumiya-san brought us, along with every other living thing, into these new layers," Koizumi pondered, "and then in the end brought us back to the original?"

Hazuki-san sighed, but she still looked grimly amused. "Told you they'd ask," she said quietly.

"I was going to get to this," Chikaru-san said, and I found myself briefly wondering if I were witnessing the tail end of a lovers' quarrel. "Koizumi-san, you're right in the sense that after the thousands of repetitions, you were returned to the layer you'd started from, but…" She paused and shook her head. "That wasn't the original one either. The world-within-the-world that you currently inhabit was created between three and four years ago, and the original one… the true *reality* from your book… is still buried away somewhere. Suzumiya-san abandoned it, and took everyone with her, but it's still there. We believe that this, more than even the thousands of other sub-worlds, is the true source of the instability. Reality is constantly trying to reassert itself, and Suzumiya-san is doing everything in her considerable power to suppress it. However, she's stretching herself more and more thinly with each closed space and time loop. The energy of creation is infinite, but she's still human, and even *her* affinity with it, as vast as it is, has limits."

There was a long silence after this, and from their faces, I saw the pieces were falling into place for Koizumi and Asahina-san as well. The reason why time travel was impossible beyond that day three-plus years ago: the same day that Koizumi's powers had awakened. That was the day that Haruhi had decided that reality was not good enough, and had substituted her own, overlaying it upon the world that was, and bringing everyone else along for the ride.

"Chikaru," Hazuki-san then said, very deliberately, "we need to tell them the rest. You know that."

From the screen, Chikaru-san closed her eyes and nodded with obvious reluctance, and I felt an enormous sense of misgiving: there was more? And it was *worse?*

" *Ara,* let me start, then," Mutsumi-san spoke up. "The reason why I was the one to join Hazuki-chan in your world today is because of something fairly unique in my background. I've had my *Souma* since

I was very small, even though I wasn't aware of it, and when I was a little girl, I actually managed to transfer some of it to two of my friends, when we made our promise to go to Tokyo University together." She gave a small smile at the memory. "From what I understand, I'm the only one who has ever done such a thing, even though I don't know how it happened, and I don't think I could do it again even if I wanted to. But anyway, that was what I came to see: if I could sense anything about whether Suzumiya-san somehow transferred some of *her* power to *you* ."

"That brings us to Nagato-san," Chikaru-san went on. She paused for a breath, and her ongoing displays of reluctance were putting me even more ill at ease. "We said before that Nagato and the Entity were beings of pure *Souma*, of the same type that Suzumiya-san possesses. The reason it's the same type… is that it *is* Suzumiya-san's *Souma* . She created the Integrated Data Sentient Entity of whole cloth, which means that Nagato-san, Asakura-san and Kimidori-san were creations of hers as well."

I'm fairly sure I gasped at that point. Sure, this thought had come up more than once in the past, but to have it confirmed that Nagato was nothing more than a creation of Haruhi's was… indescribable, really.

"There's more than that," Mutsumi-san went on, "and… *ara,* this is the hard part, so please bear with us, and… please, remember that we're here to help *all of you*, not just Suzumiya-san."

I was beginning to wonder how much of this feeling of impending doom I could handle, and found myself wishing they would cut to the chase already.

"Asahina-san," Mutsumi said, giving the other girl a wan smile from the screen, "I realize this may come as a bit of a shock, but you're not really from the future."

Asahina-san paled. "I'm… I'm not?" she quavered.

"No," Mutsumi-san said, shaking her head. "The future that you know is actually another of those layers existing alongside the reality you're living in now. It's not part of the current timeline, or the original one."

"Let me tell them the rest," Hazuki-san said in a quiet, unusually gentle voice. She came around to the front of the sofa, set her teacup down on the table, then crouched in front of Asahina-san and Koizumi, offering each of them her hand. As soon as their hands touched, I could swear I saw a trace of that green energy passing between the three of them through this connection.

"Asahina-san, the 'future' that you come from was *also* created by Suzumiya-san," Hazuki-san said to her, then turned her eyes to Koizumi. "The same goes for your organization. Both of them were created of whole cloth, just like the IDSE."

Neither of them seemed able to say a word, so I did it for them. "What are you saying, Hazuki-san?"

She lowered her eyes for a moment, then looked up at them again. "That the two of you are no more human than Nagato-san was. You're beings of pure *Souma*… created by Suzumiya-san."

Next: An uncomfortable drive home, and a dream within a dream.

For blogging and meta, please join us at Studio Nine Sparrows on Facebook.

Lastly, the world of Haruhi fic, and the world in general, lost a great one this month. Brian Randall (also known as Durandall), author of *Kyon: Big Damn Hero* and many other wonderful stories, ended his life on January 17, 2014. Though I never knew the man, he was a true storyteller, I'd like to dedicate *this* story to him. I only wish things had happened differently, Brian. Rest in peace.

Chapter 5

Part 5

The drive home was awkward, to say the least.

It also ended up not being a direct ride home, as we stopped at Asahina-san's apartment first so that she could pick up a change of clothes. Given everything that had transpired, and more particularly everything that had been revealed, she did not want to be on her own tonight, and had asked to stay the night with Hazuki-san. (In her spare bedroom, of course.) Once our maybe-not-a-time-traveler-after-all was safely dropped off at Nagato and Hazuki-san's building, Arakawa-san continued driving toward my house.

Koizumi sat in the back seat with me, and at first I thought it was because he wanted to talk, but he ended up spending the ride looking out the window, clearly lost in his own thoughts. I couldn't blame him for that. The cluster of bombshells dropped on us that evening had been enough to silence even him.

A short while later, we arrived at my house, and lacking much to say (what would help, really?), I thanked Arakawa-san for the lift and exited the car. To my surprise, Koizumi got out as well, and closed the door behind him. He then leaned up against the idling car and ran his fingers back through his hair. Obviously he had something to say, but several long moments dragged past as we stood there, neither making eye contact with the other.

I finally broke the silence. "How are you feeling?"

"Shaken," he said, an admission quite surprising in its bluntness. "You know… there are members of the Organization who have believed this all along: that Suzumiya-san was not merely the source of our abilities, but of our very lives." He took a long, slow breath. "I

was never one of them, though. I trusted my memories. I… had a childhood, you know. I had a life before Suzumiya-san, and I was certain that those memories were proof of my prior existence." He paused, then shook his head. "It appears that I was wrong."

"Have you considered that *they* might be wrong?"

"Hmm?" Koizumi asked.

"What Hazuki-san and the others said about you and Asahina-san. They might be-"

"They're not wrong," Koizumi interrupted, shaking his head. "No, I'm afraid everything they said makes sense."

"Then… they might not be telling us the truth," I offered.

He shook his head again. "No, it's not that either." Here, he finally met my eyes, and I could see how completely *drained* he looked. "Right before she drove the point home, as it were, Azuma-san took our hands, and when she did… she touched us with her energy as she was saying it. You could say she was communicating with us on multiple levels at that point, and I have no doubt in my mind that she was telling us the truth… or at least the truth as she knows and understands it." He gave a shadow of his normal smile. "I know a thing or two about deceit, I'm afraid, but I also know enough to trust my instincts." A short, humorless laugh followed. "Although it does seem that my instincts were certainly wrong about the validity of my memories. Still… once we were joined at that level, I don't think she could have lied to us if she tried."

"Maybe she was using that energy to-"

"No," he said again, a little more forcefully this time, but then quickly composed himself. "I can't explain it in words, I'm afraid, but I must ask you to trust me when I say that *we* can trust *them* . Believe me, I was skeptical of their story as well, right up until that moment." He then peered off into the distance, his eyes losing focus. "Just by

taking our hands, Azuma-san put us in touch with something infinite, and…"

He broke off, and I was half-expecting a smile and an "I'm just kidding," but neither of these came.

Instead, he took a moment to stretch, then chuckled wryly. "I cannot truly speak for Asahina-san, but I myself have been placed in a very difficult quandary, I'm afraid."

At another time, my reply would have been sarcasm, but I couldn't manage it. "What's that?"

He fixed his eyes on me. "If I bring this knowledge to my superiors, things will be… *difficult*, to say the least. While there are those who would rejoice at the idea that their 'god' is real, what will happen then? If the goal of our extra-dimensional visitors is to restore stability to Suzumiya-san and this world by bringing us back to the baseline 'reality,' what does this mean for her creations, who were not part of that original world? I daresay there would be strong resistance to the idea of helping a group with designs on potentially ending our very existence. In fact, I would not be at all surprised if the Organization would mark Azuma-san for death, even as the IDSE already has."

"They said they'd try to help, though," I said, reminding him of the conversation that had followed the largest of the bombshells. "You heard Mutsumi-san: she said that they would do everything they could to make sure nothing happens to you. Besides, you're part of *Haruhi's* world: do you really think she'd leave you behind after everything we've been through as a group?"

"True," he nodded. "Asahina-san and I would likely survive the transition, simply because of Suzumiya-san's conscious awareness of us. But the Organization is vast, and very few of its members have made themselves known to her. What would happen to those whom she created subconsciously, as the infrastructure that served to bring a Mysterious Transfer Student into her circle? What of our backers,

including the Tsuruya family? Are any of them 'real' enough to survive this return to the lost world?"

The reminder of the Tsuruya family's involvement with the Organization came as a bit of a shock. Was Tsuruya-san just another figment of Haruhi's imagination?

"Possibly," he nodded. "And if she is, while she would *also* likely survive due to Suzumiya-san's friendship with her, what of her family?"

What was to be done, then?

"If I bring this knowledge to my superiors," he said again, "the Organization will surely turn on Azuma-san and her companions, and attempt to do everything in its considerable power to stop them. They will know better than to engage Azuma-san directly, now that the IDSE has shown us the danger of such action, but believe me, they *will* find a way. Even knowing that the entire world could fall if things continue as they are, they will seek another solution. They will insist that no one can help Suzumiya-san achieve stability better than we can, and will continue to fight a losing battle."

Even if they knew that someone more powerful than Haruhi would snuff them out anyway, should Hazuki-san fail?

"Ah yes, the Lilith of whom they speak," Koizumi sighed. "I must ask you to trust me again when I say that much of the Organization would be very reluctant to place any credence in the idea that there is a power in the universe greater than that of Suzumiya-san. They will likely see the very concept of Lilith to be a boogeyman, and the Great Library an elaborate sham. They will ascribe far more sinister motives to our slider friends, and accept only that they are a threat to our very existence."

"You seem pretty certain about this," I pointed out.

"Certain enough that I know what I must do," he said quietly. He then closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "As difficult as it will be, I will have to find a way to keep this to myself. The survival of the world is more important than our own, and this way we may at least have a chance. I can only pray to whatever gods actually *do* exist that my actions do not doom countless friends and colleagues to non-existence."

I have often lamented my role in Haruhi's ongoing story, where the Fate Of Everything seemed to land on my shoulders every other week or so. Koizumi, more often than not, was the one who constantly reminded me of my place at the center of every ongoing conflict, and I would be lying if I said that I didn't sometimes resent him for it.

At that moment, though, perhaps for the first time, I realized just how much things had to absolutely *suck* for him. How often had he been forced into decisions like this? How scared was he right now? And what did he mean by *try to find a way* to keep this to himself? In a group of espers, was there any real secrecy? Would he be in danger from his own faction, as Nagato had been?

As unexpected as it was, I was truly finding myself feeling sorry for him.

He made a half-hearted effort to paste on his usual smile, and the fact that he simply could not manage it was enough to convince me that he would be true to his word. He had let his guard down like never before, and this, more than his words, made me realize that I could trust him. He would choose the world, and the SOS Brigade, over his Organization.

"You should get some rest," he said. "We have no idea what tomorrow may bring, now more than ever."

Well. *That* was reassuring.

"If I may unsettle you further before I go, then," he went on, "we must not discount Asahina-san's role in future proceedings."

I felt a small surge of annoyance, which was actually kind of a relief. At least we were back on familiar ground.

"Consider this," he elaborated. "Do you think that Asahina-san's superiors would take this news any better than my own, or indeed the IDSE? Should she report to them, I'm certain we shall see resistance from their faction as well. And now Asahina-san has situated herself at Azuma-san's side, at least for tonight. Something to ponder."

After leaving me with that particularly ominous warning, he climbed back into the car, gave a small wave in farewell, and then he was off.

As could be expected after such a day as this, I was a long time falling asleep. Even as bone-weary as I felt, my mind was racing in several different directions at once, trying to make sense of the day's revelations. After the nightly routine of getting ready for bed, I simply lay there under the covers, hands behind my head, staring blankly at the ceiling.

Sorry for him or not, *damn* Koizumi for leaving me with that last seed of doubt. Would Asahina-san really turn on us like that? Then again, would she have a choice? She said that she was used to being monitored: did the people from the future (or whatever it was) already know what was going on? They already had her conditioned to never reveal any "classified information" - did their control reach further than this? Would she *attack* Hazuki-san somehow, and end up like Asakura?

For that matter, what about the elder Asahina-san? Who was she, anyhow? If the future did not exist as we knew it, was she another person entirely, who merely *thought* she was Asahina-san? Was she just a character invented by Haruhi as a cool idea, with no thought given to how little it actually made sense?

That was when I remembered something that Nagato had said the day we had met Hazuki-san: the slider's apartment was impervious to her ability to monitor, and seemed to exist between our world and another. Would this mean that Asahina-san's superiors could not reach her there as well? Maybe that had been her intention all along: maybe she had come to the same conclusions as Koizumi, and was staying the night with Hazuki-san not to attack her, but to hide from the watchful eyes of her own handlers.

This whole thing was making me paranoid. Where would *I* stand, then? If Koizumi and Asahina-san could turn on us against their will, what choices would *I* have to make? Would Hazuki-san try to save them by pulling in more divine favors (and how many could she have, really?), or would she be forced to defend herself against them? Who would I choose to help, when push came to shove? Would I possibly have to side with Hazuki-san against my friends in order to *save* them?

I tried to take comfort in the idea that Nagato, at least, had *already* been saved. Now that she was no longer under the control of the IDSE, surely she would be our ally as well, right? Only… now that she was in a human body, would she be any more able to help than I was?

Heaving a sigh, I took my hands from behind my head and rubbed them over my face. " *Yare yare,"* I said aloud. "How much worse can this get?"

My heart stopped as someone answered me in a *very* female voice that I was certain I had never heard before. "Not the *nicest* thing I've ever heard from someone in bed with me, but I can let it slide this time."

Slowly, as though my head were mounted on a pivot being moved by servo motors, I turned to look. Lying there beside me was a girl - or rather, a woman - with violet eyes and long waves of blonde hair. She was lying on her side, propping her head up on one hand and giving me an impish smile. She had the covers pulled up to her chest

in a way that firmly straddled the line of decency, and it did not take much of my panic-induced observational skills to deduce that she was probably naked, or at the very least topless.

"Hi there," she said.

I wish I could report that I answered with some of my trademark deadpan snark, but I think I deserve a little slack here, given the circumstances. I believe my actual reply was limited to a series of noises in my throat.

"Cat got your tongue?" she asked.

"Um…"

"He speaks!" she laughed, making parts of her move in ways which required that I jam my eyes shut. This only served to make her laugh even harder. "Ohhh, too precious. It's okay to open your eyes, silly man. You're only dreaming, after all."

"I… see," I managed. "Well, that's a relief. Except that it's absolutely *not* ."

"Aww, come on," she said in a mock-pouty voice. "Doesn't every teenage boy dream of having a naked goddess in his bed?"

My eyes opened again, and I saw that this time she was smirking at me. Goddess?

The light dawned. "Oh. So… which one *are* you, then?"

"Hmm?"

"Which goddess. I understand there are two. Which one are you?"

Her smile got impossibly deeper. "I have been known by many names," she intoned with mock seriousness, before going back to her normal voice. "But you may call me the Magnificent Lilith-chan."

"Lilith," I said slowly. "So… the Creator is a blonde…"

"Not what you expected?"

"Well, you're not a pasty-white masked giant with a million legs, nailed to a cross and dripping orange goo."

She frowned. "Would you prefer me that way?"

"Uh, no," I said, in complete honesty. "So… to what do I owe the honor of a visit from God?" I immediately remembered that Hazuki-san had warned me not to call her that, but it was too late to call it back.

Lilith smiled broadly and closed her eyes. "Ah, the worshipful praise of mortals. It never gets old, let me tell you." She let out a contented sigh, then collected herself. "As for why I'm here? Just to give you a friendly reminder of what's at stake… as well as a chance to remind myself that in spite of surrounding myself with beautiful lesbians all the time, I still have my omnivorous side." She lifted the covers and made an obvious show of looking me up and down, but I'm certain I saw a lot more of her than she saw of me.

I swatted the covers out of her hand. Looking upon a naked goddess was surely the sort of thing that would lead to blindness, right? Or was it madness? Blind madness? Or was it just light-headedness due to the all blood suddenly wanting to go elsewhere? "So! Friendly reminder?" I said weakly.

"Yes, yes, friendly reminder," she repeated, obviously amused at my growing *discomfort* . "I'm afraid the early returns are in, Protagonist-san, and it's not looking too good for a happy ending to this story. Based on how your dear Haruhi-chan reacted today, the idea of her coming to terms with her divorce from reality feels out of reach."

"But… we've barely started," I protested. "Even if I knew *how* to help Haruhi, there hasn't exactly been a lot of time between fighting off

the IDSE and worrying that we'll have to do the same with the Organization and the time travelers."

"Yes, isn't it curious?" Lilith nodded. "Someone arrives from another world wanting to help your Haruhi-chan return to reality, and suddenly everyone wants to kill her." She smiled and narrowed her eyes. "Three factions, dead-set on ending the threat posed by Hazuki-chan and company. Pray tell, Kyon-chan… what do those three factions have in common?"

"They… all have members in the SOS Brigade?"

She sighed. "For the love of Me, you just found this out a couple hours ago. Come on; use the brains Eve gave you."

I stared at her for a moment, and then realization hit. Hard. "They were all… created by Haruhi."

"Fifty points for the *sh ō nen* in pajamas!" she grinned, but then her expression hardened to something more serious. "Do you think she hasn't noticed, on some level? You've 'barely started,' and she's already fighting it. Like I said, not looking good for our heroes."

"Wonderful."

Lilith nodded. "Coincidentally, or perhaps not, this brings me to the other reason I'm here. I have a proposition."

"A naked goddess is offering me a proposition," I sighed. That customary deadpan snark was not quite dead yet.

"Not that one," she giggled. "No, Kyon-chan, it's like this. In spite of what you may have heard, I *am* a merciful goddess… so long as no one screws with my books. That in mind, here's my offer: I'll rewind the clock on this world, Eve will give living bodies to your friends Itsuki, Mikuru and Megumi, just like she did for Yuki-rin, and then we'll rewrite history with a Haruhi-chan who never gained her

powers. You'll all still get to go to school together, and you'll never know that any of the rest of this ever happened."

I blinked at the goddess. "But… I thought Hazuki-san said that if we failed, Haruhi would be erased from existence."

"Technically… yes," said Lilith. "The Haruhi who exists now would have to go. But we'd replace her, and you'd never know the difference."

I had felt a string of rather strong emotions throughout this encounter with the nubile Creator, but now, for the first time, I felt a growing anger. "You expect me to go along with that?" I scowled. "You think I'd be okay with letting you kill Haruhi?"

"Technically we'd be *unmaking* her…" Lilith began.

"I don't care what you call it!" I shouted. "Would the new Haruhi be the same girl we know?"

"Technically… no."

"Then you can technically *forget it*," I snapped. "This world needs the real Haruhi, not a photocopy."

"Really?" said Lilith, arching her eyebrows at me. "Then let me tell you the alternative. Your friend continues on her current path until this world reaches the breaking point, at which time I order the Yuri Force to stand down, and I tear every last trace of her from these pages and do an emergency rewrite. At that point, I offer no guarantees that *any* of her creations will survive, though I'm sure Eve will try." Her voice was becoming sharper and more heated as she continued. "End result: you carry on in a world without *any* Haruhi *at all*, possibly without any of your *other* Brigade friends aside from Yuki, and you'll *still* not know any better, because *none* of this, not even this pleasant talk with a naked goddess, will *ever* have happened."

There was a long silence as I stared her down. When at last I spoke, I wasn't sure exactly where the words were coming from. "But this *is* happening."

"I beg your pardon?"

I flailed to grasp the tiniest threads of logic. "But this *is* happening!" I repeated. "I *am* having this talk with you! That means we *will* find a way, because if we didn't, and none of this had ever happened, then this wouldn't be happening now. Right?"

She gave me a droll look. "My, my. How very… *meta* of you."

"The fact that I'm experiencing this is proof that we can still win," I insisted, grabbing onto that thread of logic with all I had. "And we will."

"You obviously have no idea how stories actually work, do you?" Lilith chuckled. "Have you ever read a first-person narrative?"

The question caught me off-guard. "Yes, of course I have."

"Those never made sense to me," she went on. "The act of telling a story in that way implies an audience, otherwise who is the narrator talking to? And how can you build any sense of suspense or danger when you already *know* that everything's going to turn out all right for the narrator, otherwise when would he have had the time to write all of this down in the first place?"

I started feeling very uncomfortable for some reason.

"Oh, but that reminds me," she said then. "Do you know the ones that drive me nuts? First-person stories where the narrator dies at the end. How much sense does *that* make? If the guy dies at the end, how *exactly* is he able to *relate* this story, anyway?"

The discomfort grew. "Is that a threat?" I asked, my throat feeling slightly dry.

She shook her head and smiled. "Not at all. Just a reminder that your world is a story, and stories don't necessarily follow logic. Goodness, you're the one in the *least* amount of danger here. Whatever you end up doing, you'll survive. The story will continue with you in it, one way or another."

"But the story needs to continue with Haruhi as well," I said in as forceful a voice as I could muster. "The real Haruhi, not a copy."

"Are you willing to bet your friends' lives to make that happen?"

I shook my head. "That's not my bet to make. But it's also not my place to make deals with you concerning those lives: they're not mine to barter with."

Lilith stared at me for a while, then gave me a resigned smile. "I can see now why you and Hazuki-chan have hit it off so well. You're just as bull-headed and hopelessly heroic as she is."

I hoped she meant that as a compliment.

At that moment, to my complete shock, Lilith once more grabbed the covers and threw them back. Before I could say a word, she swung one leg over and then sat up on top of me, so that before I knew it, I was being straddled by a naked goddess.

Despite my overall lack of practical experience with this sort of thing, I was pretty damned aware of what this position entailed. Particularly from someone named Lilith.

"Time for me to go, Kyon-kun," Lilith winked, leaning down to kiss me on the cheek as I lay there paralyzed. She then breathed the rest in my ear. "Good luck with saving the world. After all, it would be a shame to let *this* little memory be something that never happened, wouldn't it?"

The world began to glow green, and I closed my eyes against the sudden brilliance. The next thing I knew, however, there was a hand

on my throat, squeezing just hard enough to be uncomfortable. I looked up, but instead of a glowing goddess, I saw a pair of familiar eyes looking down at me.

Haruhi.

And she looked *pissed* .

"What are you doing in my bed, Kyon?" she demanded, her voice little more than a hiss. Her hand gripped a little tighter, making it clear that there would be a lot worse to come depending on my answer.

And so we've returned to that secondary skill that comes up in times of distress like these: the sudden inexplicable eye for detail. I was in an unfamiliar bedroom that could only be Haruhi's, based on such things as the handmade ENOZ concert flyer on the wall, the girls' Kitago uniform hanging on the closet door, and oh yes, the fact that Haruhi herself was both kneeling beside me and looming over me. The room was dark save for a bedside lamp, and it was still night, based on the blackness outside the windows. Haruhi's face was livid with fury, so much so that her ever-present yellow hair ribbon almost seemed to be standing on end.

Hang on…

"Answer the damned question, Kyon!" she growled. "There aren't enough penalties *in the world* to make up for…"

"Isn't it obvious?" I said in as nonchalant a voice as I could manage, given the pressure on my windpipe. "You're dreaming, Haruhi."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"If you're not dreaming, then why are you wearing your school uniform at one in the morning?" I asked. "For that matter, why am I wearing mine? This is obviously a dream."

She looked down at herself, and for just a moment her face registered surprise at the fact that yes, she was indeed wearing a school uniform, as was I. She then took her hand from my neck, but still regarded me with an almost murderous expression. "You'd better have a good explanation for this."

I sat up, rubbing my neck absently. "I already gave you one," I frowned. "You're dreaming, remember?"

"Oh, great, so it's one of *those* dreams, then?" she sighed.

"One of *which* dreams?" I asked, standing up and carefully making my way toward the window.

"Never you mind that!" she snapped. "And where do you think you're going? You can't just wander around a girl's bedroom like that, even if it *is* a dream!"

I peeked out through the window, and as I expected, the world outside was a colorless gray, with neither city lights nor stars. We were in closed space. Once again, Haruhi had brought us into one of her new worlds (or a new layer of the onion, or whatever the hell it was). Was I going to have to kiss her again to get us out of this one?

"You shouldn't be here," Haruhi grumbled. "Or at the very least, you should be acting more like a dream."

I gave her a look of surprise. "And what should a dream me be acting like?"

Her face flushed. "Never you mind that!" she snapped again, getting to her feet and lunging forward to grab me by the tie. "You're getting out of here before someone hears you. Come on!"

She yanked me toward the bedroom door, then out into a darkened hallway. Before she could pull me to the staircase, however (or indeed throw me down it), she stopped short.

"What is it?" I whispered. Further down the hall there was another open door, and soft light spilled out from within. I heard a faint, tuneful sound, like someone was humming. "Does that mean we can't go that way?"

"There shouldn't be anyone in there," Haruhi said in a thick voice.

As gently as possible, I removed my tie from her grasp. "Is it your parents' room?"

"No," she whispered, just barely shaking her head.

"Your sister's room, then?" I asked, and then immediately wondered why I had done so.

She shot a furious glare at me, but for the first time tonight, it actually looked as though she were using her anger to cover something else: fear. "I don't *have* a sister, *baka!* "

"So who lives in that room?"

"No one! My father uses it as a home office!"

The humming definitely didn't sound male in origin. "Maybe we should see who it is?" I suggested.

The anger was beginning to lose ground, and Haruhi looked more and more unsettled. "No one lives in that room," she said again.

"Then what harm is there in checking?" I asked. Without waiting for her, I took several steps down the hall.

"Dammit, Kyon, what are you *doing?* " she hissed, bolting forward to grab my arm. By then, however, I had reached the door and pushed it further open.

Obviously, Haruhi did not want to see what was in here, which only served to convince me that it was something which needed to be

seen. I stepped into the dimly lit room, and Haruhi reluctantly followed me inside.

It was certainly not a home office. We had entered a cozy bedroom, with walls that had been painted to resemble the interior of a forest. There were several bookcases filled not only with innumerable books, but also with statuettes of dragons, ki-rin, centaurs, firebirds, unicorns, fairies, and other beasts of legend.

Against the far wall stood the bed itself, and it was from here that the humming came. A pajama-clad Mutsumi-san was lying there, half under the covers, cuddling a smaller figure against her chest: someone with long brown hair, clutching a spiral-bound notebook under the one arm that was visible above the covers.

"What are you doing here?" Haruhi said in a quavering voice.

The humming stopped, and Mutsumi-san looked up at us and smiled. "Ssshh," she whispered, placing one finger to her lips. "Imōto-chan is trying to sleep."

"Who is it, onee-chan?" came another voice, as the other girl stirred in Mutsumi-san's arms and looked up at us blearily. She then gave a tiny gasp, and her eyes went wide.

I knew that face, even as I had known it when I saw it outside the junior high school on Tanabata, three years in the past. The face was younger, as it had been then, but there was no mistaking those eyes.

For a long while, Suzumiya Haruhi stared at Suzumiya Haruhi. And then both of them screamed.

I gave a small, strangled scream of my own as my eyes shot open and I tumbled out of bed, landing in a heap on the floor. For several seconds I lay there panting as I tried desperately to get my bearings. My room. I was back in my room, and the faint glow of city lights was coming in through the windows. I was no longer in closed space. But then what about Haruhi? And… Haruhi?

Shamisen, who had been lying on me prior to my epic flail, took this moment to crawl back onto my chest, curl up and go back to sleep. Number of damns given: zero.

I felt like I needed to tell someone about this, but who could I call at this hour? Would Hazuki-san be awake? For that matter, had I even had the presence of mind to get her number yet?

That was when I remembered that someone might be listening after all. "Suzumi-san?" I said quietly. "Are you there?"

A few seconds passed, and I was about to call out again when my phone began buzzing from its place on my nightstand. After dislodging Shamisen as gently as I could, I reached for the phone and flipped it open. The display had gone black, but soon white text began scrolling across the tiny screen.

KAORI.S]: Good evening, Kyon-san. We are aware of what just transpired. Suzumiya-san summoned you to another pocket-world of her creation.

"That's what I figured, um… Kaori-san?" I said aloud, realizing at the end that I was speaking to someone new. "Is she still there? And what about Mutsumi-san? Was that really her I saw in that closed space?"

There was a lengthier pause before the text returned.

KAORI.S]: Suzumiya-san has returned to the current "active" world. However, she is very agitated, and more pocket-worlds are being created. The espers are mobilizing, and I will try to help them from here. Mutsumi-san never left the Library.

So who was the Mutsumi-san who had been cuddling with pre-teen Haruhi? An actual dream? Another creation of Haruhi's? And why had she referred to Haruhi as "little sister?" I let out a heavy sigh. So many questions…

The phone buzzed again.

KAORI.S] Hazuki-san will be calling you shortly.

As promised, within a few seconds the screen went back to normal, and I heard my standard ringtone. " *Moshi moshi?"* I said after hitting the receive button.

"Are you okay?" Hazuki-san asked without preamble.

"Yeah, I'm fine. Sorry to wake you."

"I was awake anyway. So what happened?"

I gave a brief run-down of the encounter in closed space. Hazuki-san listened attentively, then at the end gave a long sigh. "Damn. On the one hand, all of that makes sense, but on the other hand, we were hoping that she wouldn't be quite this… volatile. I was hoping we could ease her along slowly, but so far it looks like this is only making her *more* unstable."

"Hazuki-san," I said slowly, "why do you say that all of this makes sense? Is there something you haven't been telling me?"

She paused, then sighed again, this time in seeming frustration. "Several things, actually, but they're things I can't explicitly say just yet. Not until I have further confirmation myself. I'm sorry, Kyon-kun. There are always rules for this kind of thing."

"Ah. Secrets of the universe that mere mortals cannot possibly comprehend?"

"Nothing quite as epic as that, I'm afraid, but yeah, it's goddess-related."

"I see. Oh, that reminds me: was I actually dreaming earlier, or was I really visited by Lilith?"

There were another several seconds of dead air. "Lilith… came to see you?" Hazuki-san asked.

"Unless it really *was* a dream, yes."

"Did she try to make you an offer?"

"As a matter of fact, she did. I didn't take it, though. Wait… how did you know?"

"She made the same offer to me," Hazuki-san sighed. "Strip your memories, create new bodies for your friends and a new version of Suzumiya-san, and let you continue on your merry way. I told her I wasn't done yet, and anyway, I'll be damned if I let myself play God with your lives."

"I appreciate that, certainly."

"We'll figure this out, Kyon-kun," Hazuki-san said to me then, in a voice that left no doubt that she would move heaven and earth to do so. I nodded, but could not think of anything to say in reply.

After a few moments, she went on. "Do you think you could meet us here before school tomorrow? Nagato-san should be back by then, and I think it would be good for her to see both you and Asahina-san for the walk to school. Plus… I think Asahina-san would appreciate the company as well."

"I can do that," I agreed. "Thanks, Hazuki-san."

"Get some sleep."

"I'll try."

She hung up, and I set the phone back on my nightstand. A look at the clock revealed that it was a quarter to two. Lovely.

Sleep was a long time coming, all things considered, but better late than never.

Next: A Monday Without Haruhi, Nagato returns, and Kyon has an idea for which he will need Koizumi's help.

As ever, for blogging and meta, please visit Studio Nine Sparrows on Facebook.

Chapter 6

Part 6

Between the late night and the early departure from home in order to meet the others at Nagato's apartment building, I was more or less running on fumes. Making this detour did not take me egregiously out of my way, but it still required leaving home after having only the most minimal of breakfasts, and there was no time to dawdle, even in my semi-conscious state. Stifling one yawn after another, I found my mind wandering far afield as I took the unaccustomed roads across town.

How was Nagato handling her new humanity? Was it going to be the mental equivalent of going from driving a Formula One to a sub-compact?

Who was this Megumi, anyway, that Lilith had offered to have a human body made for her as well? Was that Tsuruya-san's given name? Even as I wracked my tired brains, I could not come up with any memory of her being referred to as anything other than "Tsuruya-san" in all the time I'd known her.

If someone referred to herself as being "as gay as the day is long," did that mean she felt a little more straight in the wintertime?

Was time travel actually possible, or had each instance of time travel I had experienced been another layer of the onion? But if so, was Haruhi subconsciously creating those pocket-worlds for us as we went, or was Asahina-san also capable of creating them? For that matter, the world that Nagato had created in which she was a normal girl: had she truly changed the "main" timeline, or was that a new one as well?

The memory of that shy, sweet Nagato blindsided me, then, and I remembered two specific moments from my time in her world: her tiny but unforgettable smile, and the look of sheer heartbreak she had given me shortly before I had activated the "escape program" to set history right.

Was the Nagato I was about to meet going to be *that* girl?

As I arrived at the apartment building, I was still so mindful of Nagato that I nearly dialed her room number out of habit. Instead, I caught myself in time to dial Hazuki-san's instead. After two rings, she picked up. "Kyon-kun?"

"Yeah, it's me."

"We'll be right down," said the slider, and hung up.

After a couple of minutes, three Kitago-uniformed girls came out through the security door. "Good morning, Kyon-kun!" Asahina-san called, giving me a little wave. She looked a bit subdued, but her smile seemed genuine enough.

I gave her what was no doubt a half-assed weary attempt at a smile of my own. Normally a greeting from the divine Asahina-san would be enough to fill me with energy to face the day, but between the lack of sleep and my preoccupation with our resident former alien interface, I was not as buoyed as I might have otherwise been.

The first thing I noticed about Nagato was that she looked remarkably like *herself* . It occurred to me then that I had been fearing the worst: a trembling, skittish girl inhabiting an unfamiliar body, cut off from the lifeline she had always known, traumatized and brutalized beyond human comprehension. And yet here she was, as expressionless and calm-appearing as ever.

She looked up to meet my eyes. "Good morning," she said softly.

That was when I noticed the difference: her eyes. It was the most subtle of changes, but for someone with my experience reading the nuances of her expressions, it was clear as day: her eyes had just the slightest tremor to them, lacking their normal diamond-sharp focus. She was obviously fighting *hard* against something just to hold my gaze.

Even with that, though, there was a warmth there: a warmth I had not seen in her eyes since that other world.

"Nagato," I said quietly. "How are you feeling?"

"I am… adjusting," she replied. She then looked down for a moment before bringing her eyes back to mine. "It is… good to see you," she said, and I could tell that she meant this not as a formality of greeting, but as the truth.

It was at this point that I noticed that she and Hazuki-san were holding hands. "Shall we be off?" the taller girl asked.

Without another word, we headed off to school, with Asahina-san and myself in the lead and Nagato and Hazuki-san following behind us. For a few blocks, there was no conversation, and I was having a difficult time preventing myself from glancing back over my shoulder at Nagato.

"I don't believe Koizumi-san will be joining us at school today," Hazuki-san said at last. "Apparently he and the others have been up all night dealing with closed spaces, and they're still not finished. Kaori and Tamao have been trying to help from the outside, but it's been slow going."

I nodded slowly. Did this mean that Haruhi had been up all night as well since that shared dream? Or were even her dreams causing more closed spaces to appear? What was I going to be confronted with when I arrived at my desk today?

"It's going to be hard to focus in class today," said Asahina-san. "So many things to think about…"

One of my earlier questions bubbled back up to the surface. "Asahina-san?"

"Yes?"

"Do you know Tsuruya-san's given name?"

She gave me a look of first surprise, then mild discomfort. "Um, yes, but… she's actually very traditional about things like that, so… it wouldn't be my place to tell you what…"

"Is it Megumi?" I asked.

Asahina-san actually flinched in surprise. "Did she tell you?"

I shook my head. "No, but that name came up last night when I was talking to Lilith. It sounds like Tsuruya-san might be… another one like you and Koizumi." I couldn't bring myself to say "another creation of Haruhi's," as true as it might be.

"Asahina-san," said Hazuki-san from behind us, "do you think you could introduce me to her at lunch today? That would be the best way to be sure."

"Of… of course," Asahina-san nodded, though she looked a little shaken. "But… she's not another IDSE interface, or an esper, and I'm *certain* she's not a time traveler. She's just a normal person!"

"I'm not saying she isn't," Hazuki-san said reassuringly. "In fact, if she's as normal as you say, then maybe she'll be able to provide us with some clues, or at the very least a non-Brigade perspective. Maybe she'll even lead us to the answers somehow."

"Do you really think so?" I asked as we started up the hill toward the school.

Hazuki-san let out a weary sigh. "No, not really, but I'll take anything I can get at this point."

The conversation lapsed while we took the steep incline, as everybody seemed lost in their thoughts again. I know I certainly was. That is, until a small gasp from Asahina-san returned me to the here and now.

There was a girl standing outside the school gates, looking as though she had been waiting for us. I felt an involuntary shudder as I immediately recognized the distinctive pale-green hair.

"Good morning," said Kimidori Emiri as she took two steps forward to intercept our path.

"Kimidori-san," said Hazuki-san from behind me. "I'm sorry we weren't properly introduced the last time, but as you may remember, I was slightly occupied." She was speaking in a friendly enough tone, but there was an edge to her voice almost as sharp as the katana she had been wielding the day before.

"Indeed," Kimidori smiled, and I could see that her face was back to normal, showing no sign of the damage done by Kaname-san's punch. "Though I can assure you that through Nagato-san's previous reports, I feel I already know you quite well, Azuma-san."

This conversation was obviously happening at multiple levels, and beneath the pleasantries even I could feel the tension between alien interface and slider. What did Kimidori want, anyway? Had Chikaru-san been wrong about the Entity being cowed? Was it about to make its next attack? Would we be able to protect Nagato again?

Just as I thought of her, someone nudged her way gently between myself and Asahina-san, and I turned surprised eyes on Nagato, who had moved to the front of the group to face the other girl down. "What is your business with me, Kimidori-san?"

The green-haired girl cocked her head to one side, as though surprised to be addressed so. "Only to tell you that I found yesterday's actions to be regrettable, Nagato-san. My faction was among the last to agree to your removal, and it is my personal wish that it had not come to that."

"Is that sentimentality?" said Nagato smoothly. "I thought the Entity had no place for this."

I almost dropped my bag. Had Nagato just been *sarcastic?*

"Not at all," Kimidori replied, just as smoothly. "You were a valuable resource to us, and brought much data to the collective consciousness. Your absence is an unfortunate loss to the whole of the Entity."

"I see."

"Also, we find your ghoulish reanimation into a human form to be an abomination, and the consensus grieves for what has been done to you. If at any point you find this existence unbearable, please tell me. We will make your human death as painless as possible, and return your energy to the Entity to be purged and recycled."

Asahina-san looked as though she were on the verge of a panic attack, and I could all but feel Hazuki-san's tension from behind me, as she stood ready to come to Nagato's rescue.

However, Nagato did not appear to need rescuing. She stared at Kimidori for a long while, then spoke. "Thank you for your concern, but your offer is refused. As for the consensus…" She paused a moment to glance back at me before she continued. "To echo the words of my friend, you may tell them to go fuck themselves."

That said, she turned and continued toward the school, leaving the rest of us too shocked to immediately follow after her.

"Asakura Ryōko will be returning from 'Canada' tomorrow," Kimidori said to her back.

Nagato stopped, but did not turn around.

"Given that your mission ended in the need for your termination," Kimidori went on, "it now falls to your backup to continue in your stead, both in observing Suzumiya Haruhi and in protecting her from those who would cause her harm. Including you."

"I believe," said Nagato, as she turned to look over her shoulder, "that the Entity is missing the point. We are not here to harm Suzumiya Haruhi. We are here to save her."

Haruhi, as it turned out, was not at school that day either, as the seat behind mine remained empty throughout the morning. This was a rarity, certainly, as Haruhi never seemed to get sick - probably a side-effect of being largely omnipotent. No doubt she believed herself to be above the influence of such pesky things as germs, and therefore she was.

The first half of the day thus passed in a state of sleepy concern at the idea of what she might be up to, other than making life difficult for Koizumi and the rest of the espers. Just to be sure, I poked my head into class 1-9 at the first break, but there was no sign of him either: not even a bookbag at his desk. Had he been stuck in closed space fighting Haruhi's subconscious demons for the past eight hours solid?

When lunchtime rolled around, I begged off from eating with Tanaguchi and Kunikida, who both seemed to think that *I* would somehow know why Haruhi was absent. Admittedly, I did have at least an idea of it, but it was still annoying to have them assume it like that.

I would say that I was wandering aimlessly at that point, but somehow I found myself automatically following the familiar path to

the club room. Not that Haruhi or Koizumi would be there, of course, and Asahina-san and Hazuki-san would be busy trying to determine whether or not Tsuruya-san were some sort of energy being as well. At least the title of "energy being" suited *her*, come to think of it…

I opened the club room door, half expecting an unoccupied space, but I smiled when I saw that I was wrong. "Yo," I called as I came inside and shut the door behind me.

Seated at her usual place near the windows, a book in her lap like always, was Nagato. She looked up at me as I pulled up a chair of my own nearby, and rather than go back to her book after acknowledging my presence, as she would normally have done, she continued looking at me as I sat down.

"I guess some things never change?" I said, indicating the book she carried.

She looked down at the open pages, then back at me. "Reading is more difficult than it was," she said quietly.

"How so?"

"It is harder to maintain focus."

I sighed. "How are you handling this, Nagato? Is *everything* more difficult, being human?"

She blinked a few times at this question, and it was a long while before she answered. "The adjustment has been… challenging," she admitted. "While I have retained much of my local data, I am concerned that over the course of time it may become increasingly inaccessible while stored in this organic brain. I will likely begin to… forget."

I wanted to tell her that this was nothing to be afraid of, particularly when it came to things like forgetting that endless time-loop last summer, but at the same time, I recognized how strange this had to

be. The concept of simply *forgetting* something without actively erasing the data had to be completely… well, *alien* to her.

"As well," she went on, "I am no longer able to simply observe and record. There exist layers of possible distraction at every moment, which at present I am finding it all but impossible to ignore."

"What sorts of distractions?"

She turned took me in the eye. "I have quickly come to discover," she said quietly, "that this body… has *needs* ."

I felt the blood leaving my face. There was an intensity in Nagato's gaze at that moment, and her voice had become breathier and lower in pitch. " *Needs?"* I repeated.

"Yes," she said in just over a whisper, leaning imperceptibly closer to me as she spoke. "For example… at this moment, as I speak to you, I am beginning to feel…"

I'm quite sure I froze at that point. She could have done anything at all, and I would have been too stunned to react.

And then she brought me back into the moment. "… a terrible itch on my scalp, just above and behind my left ear."

I exhaled and leaned back slightly, wondering briefly whether to be relieved or disappointed. "Perhaps you should give it a scratch," I suggested.

She looked at me strangely for a moment, then lifted one hand to do just that. Her eyes closed, and she let out a tiny sigh.

"It might be your shampoo," I suggested. Anything to fill the awkward silence. "Some of them are more gentle to the skin than others. Maybe you should try a different one."

"Possibly," she acknowledged, looking away again to stare off into nothing. Her lips worked silently for a moment, as though trying to

find the correct words. "But this is indicative of my difficulty. My previous manifestation required very little maintenance in order to function: basic sustenance, minimal rest, and sufficient cleanliness to meet social norms. Everything else could be effectively ignored or overridden. Now, however, I feel every demand this body makes of me. Sights, sounds, smells and tastes are no longer mere data, but stimuli which can provoke involuntary reactions. After climbing the hill this morning, I briefly felt the dull ache of my muscles before they recovered from the exertion. While reading, I found my focus constantly challenged by thoughts of concern for the well-being of my friends, or the knowledge that I should use the restroom before returning to class, or the warmth of the sunlight through the windows. One stimulus after another, all of them constantly demanding attention from my conscious mind."

I had seen this movie before. In any story where a robot or an omnipotent being found itself human for the first time, there would be this kind of reaction. At any moment, I expected to hear something akin to "How do you humans *stand* it?"

That in mind, what happened next left me more stunned than a lightning strike would have done.

Nagato turned back to me… and *smiled* .

"It is indeed difficult," she said quietly, "but I have chosen to view it as a chance to experience data that would have remained forever out of my reach as a part of the Integrated Data Sentient Entity. I was correct in my conclusion that the presence of Azuma Hazuki would lead to the death of Nagato Yuki, the data terminal. What I had not realized, however, was that these visitors would also be the key to my rebirth."

I believe the correct phrase at this point was that you could have knocked me over with a feather.

Her smile faded, but the traces of it remained on her lips as she lifted her own hand and studied it carefully. "When I was in the Great

Library," she said, and I could hear the capital letters in her voice as she said it, "I had the chance to meet many others like myself: human beings containing the energy of creation, which they call *Souma* . They were all quite helpful to me in different ways. Otohime Mutsumi, Tendō Rushuna and Minamoto Chikaru are healers, sharing the energy of Eve, the life-giving goddess. They soothed my transition into my new form, and were a source of great comfort in those difficult first hours. Suzumi Tamao and Sakuragi Kaori, like Suzumiya Haruhi, share the energy of Lilith, the maker goddess, and in my brief contact with them they taught me much about my origins, and what I have now become."

"And… what *have* you become, Nagato?" I asked quietly.

She paused for a moment, and slowly clenched her hand into a fist. "I am an individual being: neither a face of the Integrated Data Sentient Entity, nor an extension of the *Souma* of Suzumiya Haruhi. The creative energy housed within my body is my own, now, and as such, it has changed to suit my perception of myself." She looked up at me again, and her eyes were like steel. "Like Azuma Hazuki, Kenjō Kaname and Ryofu Hōsen, I share the energy of the absent third god, and my role is not to create, or to heal… but to *protect* . I am a *yami* ."

"A… *yami?* " I repeated, feeling uncomfortable at the connotations of such a word.

She nodded, perhaps noticing my discomfort. "You need not be concerned by the title," she assured me. "Darkness does not necessitate the presence of what you would call evil. As those three have taught me, being a *yami* means acting as the sword and shield for all that we hold dear… even if we must venture forth into darkness to do so."

"So… not unlike what you've been doing already," I speculated.

"Precisely. I am… *content* with this role. While I now lack my prior abilities to manipulate data outside of myself, I am confident that I

will be able to continue to keep my promise to Suzumiya Haruhi… as well as my promise to you." She met my eyes once again, and I saw that spark of determination ignite once more. "I will not allow either of you to come to harm."

I stared at her for a long time, then finally noticed that I was smiling. "Thank you, Nagato."

"You are… quite welcome," she nodded.

Part of me wanted to leave it at that, but there was still another nagging concern. "Nagato," I said slowly, "I don't mean to pour salt in the wound, but… is it hard to have lost your connection with the Entity?"

She tilted her head slightly as she considered it. "It is inconvenient, certainly," she said at length. "Several times already I have found myself mentally attempting to file requests for data, only to remember that I no longer have that access. It is also true that during the moments when I am not inundated with the distractions of this human form, I am keenly aware of a sense of absence within."

After saying this, she stood up, set her book on her chair, then stepped closer and crouched beside me, extending one hand. I was a bit surprised at this unspoken request, but I offered my hand all the same, and she took it in both of hers. Her hands were warm, I noticed, and very soft.

"However," she said quietly, "the other *Souma* -bearers have shown me an even greater connection than that: my energy is a part of creation itself, and *that* is something far more awe-inspiring than even the Entity." She paused, and seemed to be studying my hand quite closely. "Also, when *Souma* -bearers make physical contact in this way, we are able to share our energy, and the resulting feeling of closeness and unity is… indescribable. It is something deeper and far more intimate than any data link." She then looked up at me again, and her eyes now appeared sad. "It is… regrettable… that I cannot share this connection with you."

I wanted to make a flippant joke that maybe the intimacy of this connection might be the reason why so many of them were lesbians, but then her last words registered, and I nearly choked on my tongue.

Share this… with me?

"Nagato," I said quietly.

"Yuki," she whispered. "Please call me Yuki."

I opened and closed my mouth a few times, taken completely off-guard, not only by the unexpected "intimacy" of *this* moment, but by the potential consequences for an already unsettled Haruhi.

Perhaps sensing the same, she turned up one corner of her mouth in a half-smile. "Though perhaps… you should only call me that when Suzumiya Haruhi is not within earshot."

Before I could say anything at all, the door opened, and I was suddenly aware of what this would look like: Nagato kneeling before me, holding my hand, staring into my eyes… Could this be Haruhi, appearing as though summoned by the sound of her name?

" *Ara ara*, as Mu-chan would say," came an amused voice, and when I looked back I saw Hazuki-san grinning at us. "Am I interrupting anything?"

The rest of the school day passed without incident, though as could be expected, I was *also* finding it difficult to concentrate past the distracting thoughts. That seemed to be the theme for the day. At the end of class, the sensei called me up to his desk and asked me to deliver the week's assignments to Haruhi, and I wondered if he, too, just assumed that I was Haruhi's keeper by this time.

As though by some sort of unspoken agreement, I found an up-until-recently alien, a possibly-never-had-been time traveler, and a pretty-

sure-she-was slider waiting for me by the shoe lockers. After exchanging only the briefest of greetings, we set off.

Hazuki-san had not discovered anything Earth-shattering in her lunchtime meeting with Tsuruya-san, though she had confirmed that our energetic senpai did, in fact, "smell" of *Souma*, and was almost certainly one of Haruhi's creations after all. I wasn't sure what to think about this, to be honest. Tsuruya-san was hardly a member of the "inner circle" that orbited Haruhi: if even secondary acquaintances like her were part of Haruhi's rebuilt world, who else might qualify? Tanaguchi, our lecherous classmate? The president of the Computer Club, her occasional foil? Was *everyone* suspect at this point? Lilith had only mentioned Asahina-san, Koizumi and Tsuruya-san in her "deal," but could there be others that she simply did not think were important enough?

Asahina-san looked more distressed than usual as we walked down the hill, and I asked her if there were something specific on her mind.

"It's my superiors," she said quietly. "They're demanding a report, and I've been delaying as long as possible, but… they won't accept my excuses for much longer." She bit her lower lip. "I'm afraid of what they might do once they learn what's been happening here. Whether or not they actually *are* in the 'true' future, they *believe* they are, and they'll see all of this as a threat to predestiny."

"Would they ask you to take action?" I asked.

She shook her head. "Not me, no. I'm not trained for… for combat situations. It's more likely they would remove me and send in someone else to do the… um… wetwork."

"Unprecedented," said Nagato, deadpan. Was she making a joke? Either way, it was very strange to hear such a term as "wetwork" coming from Asahina-san's angelic lips.

"Would you like to stay the night again, Asahina-san?" Hazuki-san asked. "That should keep them off your back for a while, and maybe

we can come up with another solution for you tonight."

Asahina-san nodded, though she still looked absolutely wretched. "If they can't reach me, though… they may send someone to check on me."

"We'll deal with that when the time comes," Hazuki-san assured her.

At this point, we split up, as Asahina-san needed to go back to her own apartment to pick up supplies. Nagato accompanied her, citing that it would be safer that way. Apparently she was taking her new role as protector to heart.

Hazuki-san and I walked on in silence for a while, until she finally broke it. "I'm sorry, Kyon-kun."

Sorry? For what?

"It doesn't seem like we've been any help at all," she said softly. "In fact, I think we've only managed to speed things along toward the Bad Ending of this game, and I don't think we can go back to a save point anymore."

I was grimly amused by her use of game terminology: it was somehow reassuring to hear this superhuman ninja *femme* from another planet talking like a geek.

"Give me the bottom line, then," I said to her. "What do we need to do?"

Hazuki-san frowned, and for a moment I thought she looked annoyed, though not at me. "Nearly four years ago, Suzumiya-san had a traumatic break with reality, and split off this substitute world in its place. We need her to come to terms with the event that caused that break. She's living in denial, as some people do when they suffer a loss. It's just that… she's powerful enough that her denial drags the rest of the world along with her."

At that moment, it was as though the sun broke through the clouds in my sleep-deprived mind. "Her sister," I whispered. "She *did* have a sister, didn't she?"

"She did," Hazuki-san nodded tightly.

"Did her sister… die that day? And now Haruhi can't cope with it?"

"You're heading into questions that I've been specifically forbidden to answer," Hazuki-san said in a low voice, the look of irritation returning. "But you're on the right track."

Was that what we had seen in the dream, then? The "home office" that had once belonged to her older sister? Then why had we seen Mutsumi-san there? Haruhi had been nothing but uncomfortable with the Okinawan slider: why had *she* been playing the role of the lost sister?

Unless…

"Hazuki-san," I asked carefully, "was Haruhi's sister… one of you?"

She tightened her lips. "I'm sorry, Kyon-kun. I can't tell you the answer to that. Not yet, anyway."

"Classified information, eh?" I sighed in frustration. What was it about Haruhi's observers, anyway? Why did every single one of them seem to have such difficult bosses?

"Something like that. But the point still stands. We need to help Haruhi come to terms with her loss. If we just blurted out all the answers to her without somehow preparing her for the reality of it, she'd just go deeper in denial, and try to make *another* world, and then *another* . Your book would hit the breaking point, and…" she waved her hand vaguely, but I already knew the answer. No more Haruhi. Possibly no more of the others, either.

By this time we had arrived at her building, and she stopped and turned to face me. "So again, I'm sorry, Kyon-kun. I don't know what impression you've gotten of us, but we're still human. Lilith warned us that this would never work, but we were too stubborn to let it go without a fight."

"But if you *hadn't* fought," I pointed out, "we would have gotten the Bad Ending anyway, right?"

Hazuki-san crossed her arms over her chest and stared off into the distance for a while, then nodded. "Eventually."

"Then… I'm glad you're still human." Or at least as human as you can be when you can get shot in the lung and recover in a few hours.

She gave a single snort of laughter. "Don't get the wrong idea: getting shot hurts like hell, *Souma* or not."

The way she said it made it seem like she'd endured worse.

"Shot, stabbed, hit the ground at terminal velocity, had a piece bitten out of my arm, ran half a kilometer while holding in my own intestines with one hand, and had my neck broken by friendly fire. For starters."

"I… see. Well, I can relate to the stabbed part, at least."

"We'll keep at it," she said with a wan smile. "Call me if you think of anything, or if you get invited along for any more dreams: Tamao-chan will let your cell signal get through."

"Will do."

From there, I continued on toward Haruhi's house. I wasn't intimately familiar with her neighborhood, but I found my way there without any trouble. I paused before knocking, however: what would I say to her if she answered? How exactly does one delicately broach the subject

of someone being in denial of the death of her sister, never mind the world-bending aspects that we'd been hiding from her for all these months?

I knocked anyway. After a few moments, the door opened, and I found myself face to face with a forty-something woman who bore at least a passing resemblance to Haruhi. It suddenly occurred to me that in all these months, I had never once met her family. "Good evening?" she said, more as a question than a greeting.

"Ah, yes. Good evening. Are you… Suzumiya-san? Haruhi's mother?"

"I am," she nodded.

"I'm a classmate of hers. The sensei sent me with her assignments." I took the stack of papers from my bag.

"Oh, you must be Kyon-kun," she smiled. "From the uniform, I thought it must either be you or Itsuki-kun, but I know he's not in her class. Thank you for bringing them."

I handed them over. Behind her, I could see the bottom of the staircase from that dream, and I found myself desperately wanting to climb it, so that I could check out that room. "Um… how is Haruhi?"

"She's been in bed all day, poor thing. I think she's sleeping now, at least. I'll be sure to tell her you came by, though."

"Thank you," I bowed. "I hope she feels better soon." Understatement of the decade, right there.

She bade me farewell, then closed the door. I walked off across the street and took a look back at the house. The main building had two stories, with a single-story attached garage. Two upstairs windows overlooked the roof of the garage: were those the windows for the two bedrooms I'd seen in that dream? If only I could get inside to have a look around. Maybe there would be something there: even a

trace of that younger Haruhi. Surely she had to have left *something* behind when the world changed…

That was when it hit me. I had been using the mental shorthand of "dream" for so long that I had come to think of last night's experience as having been just that, but it *wasn't* . That had been a *closed space*, not a dream.

Suddenly aware of the fact that I shouldn't be discovered staring at a window that might have been Haruhi's, I continued down the street, pulling out my phone and dialing as I did. He might not even be there yet, but I needed to ask while the idea was fresh.

After three rings, I heard a click from the other side, followed by a mumbling voice. "Go for Itsuki."

Please tell me you didn't actually just say that, Koizumi.

"Forgive me," the esper said around a yawn, "but I'm too exhausted to care right now. What can I do for you?"

"How many closed spaces have you been in, would you say?"

"Um..? Dozens? Scores? Probably not hundreds quite yet, but we're certainly making a run at it of late."

"Have any of those closed spaces ever been around Haruhi's house?"

"No, not one," he replied, sounding baffled that I had even brought this up. "Her home has always been the one spot that seems to be immune to them, as it were. Why are you asking this?"

"Because I was in another closed space with Haruhi last night, and it was *at her house* ."

There was a pause, a sound of something shifting, and when Koizumi spoke next, he sounded a bit more awake. "You have my attention."

"There's a coffee shop three blocks east of Haruhi's house. Can you meet me there? I have an idea, but I can't do it without your help."

Next: Kyon and Itsuki's Excellent Adventure

Chapter 7

Part 7

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Koizumi arrived at the coffee shop within twenty minutes, and quickly ordered himself something very large and very black. I don't mind saying that he looked like hell, and his cheerful smile had an almost sarcastic edge to it.

"Is that going to be enough caffeine to wake you up?" I asked as he took a sip.

"One hopes," he said, grimacing at the flavor. "Ah, dark and bitter. Just like my mood. It should serve another purpose as well, though, so it's just as well that I have the excuse to drink this much."

"Another purpose?" I repeated.

He took another sip, then nodded absently. "Yes, you see… use of stimulants actually makes it more difficult for one's mind to be read, and since I have a feeling that you and I will be talking about things that my superiors should not know about, I'd better get to work on finishing this."

I paused while he took a longer drink. "Are you being monitored?" I asked. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

"Not as such," he said in reply. "However, I do believe that they suspect I may know more than I am letting on, and there are those within the Organization who want me removed from this sensitive position, citing that my personal feelings for Suzumiya-san and the rest of you have likely interfered with my ability to be impartial." Another sip, and then a weary smile. "They are correct, of course, but no sense in making it obvious for them."

This was beginning to sound a lot like what had happened to Nagato, not to mention what Asahina-san was suspecting would happen to her. At least the factions were being consistent. "Level with me, then. Is it safe for me to be talking to you?"

"You'll forgive me if I consider 'safe' to be a relative term at present," he chuckled mirthlessly. "For example, you should probably know that I am currently under orders to either kill Otohime Mutsumi on sight, or to immediately request backup to do the same should I encounter her."

You know that clichéd expression about having a chill run down your spine? That expression became a cliché for a reason. This was the second time that he had hinted at this. "So the Organization is in the business of killing people, then?"

"If that person is judged a threat to reality as we know it, then yes. There are hard-liners amongst the Organization who would happily eliminate anyone who causes emotional unrest in Suzumiya-san, but until now, saner heads have always prevailed. This time, however, I was not able to sway the argument."

He gave me a grim little smile as he said this, and that chill came back stronger than ever. "Anyone who upsets Haruhi, eh?"

"Indeed," he nodded.

"So how many times have they called for *my* head, then?"

"Tell me more about this closed space you visited last night," he said, his expression not changing.

I stared at him for a few seconds, wondering uncomfortably how many arguments he'd "swayed" on my behalf over the last year-plus. "Right," I said slowly. "Closed space, then."

I explained the "dream" as best I could, from feeling Haruhi's hand on my throat to the appearance of her younger self cuddled against

Mutsumi-san.

"Interesting," he pondered. "You're certain that it was a closed space, then?"

"The night-shift slider told me that I'd been pulled into another pocket-world that Haruhi created," I nodded. "This was the first time that there was someone else in it, though."

"Hmm, yes and no," Koizumi nodded. "If our slider friends are correct, and they certainly believe they are, Suzumiya-san has created thousands of new layers and pulled the entire world along with her."

"But those aren't closed spaces," I protested, but then stopped. "Are they..?"

"Perhaps we should consider them as being two results of the same mechanism," he explained, though I had the feeling he was making this up as he went. "Perhaps the onion-layers, such as our endless summer, are occasions when Suzumiya-san is dissatisfied with the world in general, but not its very existence or her place in it. The closed spaces, on the other hand, would be the manifestation of her subconscious wish to see the current world destroyed."

I shook my head. "There wasn't any destruction going on in this one, though. Not a glowing blue giant in sight: just a younger Haruhi and a vision of Mutsumi-san that apparently wasn't her at all."

"Yes, the appearance of a younger Suzumiya-san is intriguing," he said, rubbing his chin with one hand. "Especially with her being the approximate age at which we believe her powers awakened." A more troubled look crossed his face, and he took another long drink of his coffee. "You said you needed my help for something. I presume you did not simply mean this chance to hash things out over coffee?"

"I want to check for closed spaces around her house," I said. "Obviously I can't do that on my own."

"I do not feel the presence of any closed space at the present time," Koizumi said flatly. "Otherwise, I would not be here having this pleasant chat with you."

"None of the espers detected it last night either, did they?"

He paused. "True, but we were a little busy…"

"Humor me, then," I said. "I've just got a gut feeling that the answers are in that second bedroom, but if that room doesn't exist in our current world, maybe you can get us there."

In spite of the fact that it still had to be uncomfortably hot, Koizumi drained the rest of his coffee, then set down his cup, twitched violently for just a moment, and nodded to me. "Very well. I'll humor you. Not because I think it will work, mind you, but because I don't see a lot of alternatives at this time. It may be a crazy idea, but it's an idea, and that's more than I have at present. Shall we go, then?"

We headed back in the direction of Haruhi's house, and were just turning the corner onto her block when Koizumi suddenly stopped me, then hastily shoved me back a few steps. "Hey, what gives?" I groused.

"Take a look around the corner and see for yourself."

The corner house had a tall wooden fence around it, so it gave me cover as I slowly approached and took a look down toward Haruhi's house.

She was standing on the roof of the single-story garage, arms wrapped around herself, looking up at the sky. It was a very pensive pose, not quite like her classic melancholy self, but definitely not happy or cheerful.

Koizumi appeared at my shoulder, craning his neck to look past me. "Well, at least she didn't see us."

"She's not even facing us."

"Sometimes I don't think that matters when it comes to Suzumiya-san," he chuckled, stepping back into "cover" and leaning against the fence. "Shall we give her a few minutes?"

"I suppose," I sighed, mirroring his pose at a safe distance.

The conversation lapsed for a good minute or more, and as much as I had grown to loathe Koizumi's lectures, I was actually finding the silence unsettling. "Tell me something," I said at last.

"What's that?"

"What do you think of Haruhi?"

He gave me a curious look. "Well, as you can surely guess, my opinion of her has changed greatly in the last twenty-four hours. Finding out that she was my creator may have had something to do with that."

"That wasn't what I meant," I sighed. Having coffee with Koizumi had reminded me of the other world, where he and Haruhi had been students at the Kouyouen School. The Koizumi from that world had been quite clear about his attraction to Haruhi. Normally I wouldn't give a toss about his feelings, but in light of recent events, it was beginning to dawn on me that I had always treated Koizumi pretty shabbily, especially considering that he had had my back all along.

"Then what *did* you mean?" he asked.

"I mean… if Haruhi wasn't this god-like figure, if you were just looking at her as a girl… what would you think of her?"

He narrowed his eyes. "I don't see the relevance of the question," he said evenly. "Suzumiya-san is most certainly *not* a 'normal girl,' so to speculate otherwise…"

"Look," I sighed, "do you find her attractive or not?"

Maybe it was the caffeine, or maybe it was the ever-crumbling mask, but the look Koizumi gave me was nothing short of astounded. "Again, I do not see the relevance of the question," he said, quickly composing himself. "Nor do I see any relevance in pursuing this line of thought. Suzumiya-san is what she is, and she has made her choice plain. My feelings do not matter."

Yes, yes, her choice was plain. Everyone was always so keen to point out that I had been "chosen" by Haruhi, as if I had nothing to say about it. "You said you'd humor me," I reminded him. "Look, I'm sure you have to have some level of professional detachment, right? If you and Haruhi were to get involved with one another, I'm sure the rest of your Organization would have a fit."

"Overall, you are quite correct," he nodded, looking oddly impressed at my observation. "Mind you, there are those who have suggested that my role should all along have been to seduce Suzumiya-san, so that we could have more direct control over her."

"As if anyone could 'control' Haruhi," I snorted. Probably a bunch of old men with their outdated notions of what women should be like. Someone like Haruhi would eat them alive.

He smiled thinly. "Quite true. Frankly, I do not know if I could have handled that level of responsibility. While the idea of having a relationship with Suzumiya-san is certainly appealing, being in a position to have such a profound effect on her emotional state, and with it the state of the world, would be daunting to say the least." His tiny smile faded into a frown. "Plus, regardless of how genuine my feelings might be, it would be a relationship built on lies, and even a professional liar like myself has to draw the line somewhere."

"Well, at least you sort of answered the question," I noted.

"I suppose I did," he mused. "But again, my own feelings are irrelevant when compared to…"

Quite suddenly, Koizumi's eyes rolled back, and his legs gave out beneath him, so that he collapsed backward against the fence and slid down into a boneless seated position. I was about to make a move to try to catch him when I heard a familiar voice. "Don't worry, Kyon-kun, I haven't hurt him. I just couldn't have him listening, that's all."

Stepping literally out of nowhere, dressed in a tight black skirt and white blouse (though it looked more unbuttoned than usual) was the adult version of Asahina Mikuru.

My phone immediately started buzzing in my pocket. "Um, I should probably get that," I said lamely.

She stepped very close and laid her hand over my arm. "It can wait, surely?" she smiled. "It's always so nice to see you again, Kyon-kun!"

"So, ah, to what do I owe the pleasure?" I stammered, trying not to look down into her cleavage.

"I'm worried, Kyon-kun," she frowned, but I noticed a tiny flicker in her expression that hinted at greater agitation than even that. "My younger self has not reported back to us for quite some time, and I'm concerned that these invaders might harm her." She pressed even closer, her hand still on my arm. "Surely you must recognize that if they alter the timeline in such a way, history could unravel completely! If I cease to exist at this point in history, then I could never have helped you all those times, now, could I?"

"I suppose not," I conceded.

"I'm glad we understand each other," she smiled, but her voice was beginning to sound strained. "So tell me, Kyon-kun, where *is* little Mikuru right now?"

"I… I'm afraid I can't say for sure," I dodged. "I haven't seen her since shortly after I left school today."

"Ohhh, I think you know," she purred, but again, there was a terrifying note of desperation creeping in. "Would you maybe tell me for… a kiss?" she asked, then hooked one finger in the top remaining button of her blouse and pulled down slightly. "Or… a peek, perhaps?"

The surreality that the older Asahina-san was actually trying to use her body to get information from me was only compounded when a door opened in a nearby parked car, and I saw the glint of sunlight from the barrel of a gun. "That's enough, time traveler," said another woman, as out of the vehicle stepped Sonou Mori, one of Koizumi's many associates with the Organization. Had she been watching us the whole time?

"This doesn't concern you!" Asahina-san snapped, her voice suddenly filled with fury as she turned her eyes on the newcomer.

"I disagree, considering what you did to one of our agents," Mori-san scowled, stepping up behind Asahina-san and jamming her pistol into the other woman's back. "Wake Koizumi-kun *right now*, or I pull the trigger."

"You wouldn't dare shoot me on a public street," Asahina-san said with more confidence in her voice than was showing on her face.

"Try me," Mori smiled thinly, but then her eyes went wide as the cool steel of a hunting knife appeared at her throat, and I once again heard a laugh from my nightmares.

"Oh, this will never do," said Asakura, materializing behind Mori-san. "As much as it pains us to be working with the time travelers at this juncture, I'm afraid I can't let you interfere."

"She's right, you know," Asahina-san added, not daring to look behind her. "If you interfere with my mission, all of existence is imperiled."

"And we don't like that idea much," Asakura smiled brilliantly. She then looked past the other two and winked at me. "Hello again, Kyon-kun! I'm looking forward to seeing you in class tomorrow!"

Just when I was wondering if this could get any more ridiculous, a hand clasped Asakura's shoulder, and she immediately began to smolder with green smoke, even as an impassive face with rose-colored eyes and hair appeared behind her. "Didn't I kill you already?" came the soft voice of the slider they called Ryofu.

Before anyone could answer, Ryofu-san struck, straightening her hand and delivering a chop to Asakura's neck that literally decapitated the alien, even as her other hand reached around to snag the knife from Mori-san's throat. She then delivered a kick to the Organization agent's leg, knocking her feet out from under her, and grabbed the gun with her free hand before Mori-san could even hit the sidewalk. In a further whirling blur of motion, she stepped past the disintegrating alien and the falling human woman, then quite roughly slammed Asahina-san back into the fence.

In less than two seconds, Ryofu-san had the gun in her left hand, trained on Mori-san, and the knife in her right hand, the point grazing Asahina-san's throat.

Did I mention that all of this was happening on a residential street in broad daylight?

"You should both go now," Ryofu-san said in her soft, whispery voice.

"You don't understand!" Asahina-san said, sounding very close to hysterics. "If my younger self dies, everything is in jeopardy!"

"I see," Ryofu-san nodded. "So what happens if your *current* self dies?"

Asahina-san's eyes widened, and then she winked out of existence before Ryofu-san could make good on this threat.

"Who are you?" Mori-san asked, staring balefully up at the pink-haired woman.

"I'm the person who's telling you to leave now," Ryofu-san replied evenly, turning to look down at Mori-san.

I was not in a good position to see the look exchanged between them, but Mori-san's eyes quickly became wide and vacant as she stared up at the slider, and she carefully got to her feet, made for her car, and drove the hell away.

Ryofu-san immediately tucked the gun and knife into her work-boots and knelt beside Koizumi, placing one hand to the side of his face. I saw a brief shimmer of green energy at the point of contact.

"Are you a healer?" I asked, still slightly numb. I thought Nagato said she was one of the *yami* -type.

"No, but he doesn't need one," Ryofu-san explained. "All he needs is energy."

Even as she said this, Koizumi stirred, blinked a few times, then looked from Ryofu-san to me. "What just happened?"

Ryofu-san looked up at me as well. "Whatever you're going to do, you should do it now."

I offered Koizumi a hand to help him stand. "Should we tell Hazuki-san about what's going on?"

"She already knows," Ryofu-san nodded. "She would have come herself, but I was already on standby at the Library. Now go. Things will only escalate from here."

"Are you one of the sliders?" Koizumi asked Ryofu-san. He was still looking a little dazed, but I was already yanking him to his feet before he could start a conversation with the warrior.

"Good luck," Ryofu-san called after us, and then she was gone as well in a shimmer of green.

"May I assume that things have gotten a little too interesting, then?" Koizumi asked me as we hurried across Haruhi's street and started making our way toward her house at a fast walk.

"We just had a visit from all four of the factions," I explained. "It was all guns, knives, threats and cleavage."

"Then let's hope your hunch is correct," Koizumi said gravely, though he looked a bit bemused at my last example. "If they've grown bold enough to attack on a public street, things must be getting desperate. What's the plan?"

"Get close to Haruhi's house and see if you can shift into closed space."

"And if Suzumiya-san sees us?"

"Worry about that when it happens."

We did manage to slip between her house and her neighbor's without Haruhi catching sight of us, though again, it was broad daylight, and it wouldn't do at all to be caught skulking around like this. "Anything?" I asked Koizumi as we stood against the side wall, away from any windows.

"I don't sense anything," he sighed, looking disappointed.

"What would happen if you tried to shift into closed space anyway?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Nothing. There's nowhere to shift *to* ."

"Would it hurt to try?" I asked. "Seriously, would it be dangerous?"

"No, it just wouldn't…" he frowned, then shook his head again and offered his hand. "Fine. I'll humor you further."

I grabbed his hand, instinctively looking around to make sure no one could see us. "Give it a shot, then."

"I wouldn't be doing this if I felt we had any other… options…?"

He trailed off at the end of his sentence as the world shifted around us, leaving us in the grays and blues of closed space. I let out a sigh of relief, or at least something very close to it, and then looked over at Koizumi, whose eyes were widened in genuine shock.

"It was here all along," he whispered. "This isn't a *new* space at all, but… it was perfectly disguised all this time!"

I disengaged my hand from his and started making my cautious way around to the front of the house. "Now we just need to figure out *why* it's here."

"For what it's worth," he told me, "I have lost all mental contact with the Organization. I do believe we've fallen completely off the grid."

"Do you think you can still get us back?"

"Yes. I can still sense the world we came from, but nothing more."

Something occurred to me then. "Suzumi-san?" I asked the air. "Can you still hear us?"

There was no reply. I took out my phone and flipped it open, but the screen was dead.

Koizumi looked over my shoulder at the blank readout. "Looks like we're on our…"

" *Hey! What are you two doing here!"*

We both looked up at the sound of that familiar voice, and there, looking down at us from the roof of the garage, was Haruhi. Not the Haruhi we'd just left behind, though: this was the younger one I'd seen in the dream, pajamas and all.

"Haruhi!" I called. I know. Imaginative of me.

"How do you know my name?" she scowled. "Get out of here! I don't know who you are, but you shouldn't be creeping around girls' houses like this! Now beat it!"

She backed away from the edge of the roof, and before I could call after her again, I suddenly felt a warmth from behind, and noticed that I was now leaving a red-edged shadow against the wall. Before I could move, Koizumi hooked his arms under mine from behind and took us both airborne. In moments, we alighted on the roof, not five meters from a wide-eyed Haruhi. "How did… who are..?!"

"My apologies for the display, Suzumiya-san," Koizumi said in his most placating voice as his aura faded, "but I assure you that we come as friends."

"Haruhi," I went on, "I need to talk to you about-"

But she was no longer standing there, as she darted toward an open bedroom window and ducked inside, slamming it behind her and yanking the curtains closed.

I hadn't come this far to be shut out, though: not with God-knows-what waiting for us back in the world we'd just departed. I carefully made my way across the slight tilt of the rooftop, knelt at the window and knocked. "Haruhi, please! We're here to help!"

"Go away!" she called from inside. "I have a baseball bat and I'm not afraid to use it!"

I took a deep breath, then decided to lay out all my cards. "Haruhi, we need to talk to you about your sister!"

There was a long silence, and for a moment I wondered if I had made the right bet. Then, the curtains were opened from inside, and Haruhi unlocked and threw open the window. Before I could say a word, she'd grabbed me by my uniform tie (something inherently

Haruhi, I guess) and yanked my face to within centimeters of her own. "Where is she?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," I sighed. "Look, Haruhi, can we come in?"

It was the very same bedroom from the "dream" the night before: walls painted to resemble the interior of a forest, beasts of myth and legend on every flat surface, and loads and loads of books. Haruhi sat on the unmade bed, arms crossed, with the aforementioned baseball bat lying beside her within easy reach.

Koizumi took a seat at a small writing desk and looked around the room appreciatively. "I like the décor," he smiled. "Is this your room, Suzumiya-san?"

"It's my sister's room," Haruhi said in what was almost a growl. She then drilled me with her gaze. "So who are you, anyway?"

"My name's John Smith," I replied, because really, why not? I then indicated Koizumi. "This is, uh…"

"Bob Jones," Koizumi said, a little more easily than I might have expected.

Haruhi looked extremely unimpressed. "So what are you? Aliens? You must be *something* weird, right? Regular people don't fly like that."

"I guess you could say we're dimension-travelers," I said, scratching the back of my neck.

"Sliders, huh?" she nodded. "Interesting. So where's my sister?"

"I was kind of hoping you could tell us," I sighed. How to couch this? "Where did you see her last?"

"Right out there on the roof," Haruhi frowned, waving toward the open window.

The… roof. Yet another involuntary chill as I immediately went to the mental image of Haruhi witnessing the suicide of her older sister. "What happened to her?" I asked carefully.

"She… went away," Haruhi said uncomfortably, but then she covered it up with that familiar scowl. "But she's coming back! She wouldn't leave me without coming back, and I'm waiting *right here* until she does!"

"Kyon," said Koizumi suddenly in a hollow, distant voice that I don't think I'd *ever* heard from him, "you… might want to see this…"

I looked over at him, and saw that he was looking inside a spiral-bound notebook which he had probably found on the desk. He passed it to me, and I recognized it as the one Haruhi had been holding in her hand while cuddling with Mutsumi-san in last night's dream. Koizumi himself looked as though someone had just walked over his grave.

"Hey!" Haruhi snapped. "Did I give you permission to look at that?"

"What is it?" I asked.

"Just… an outline for a story I was working on," she said, discomfort once again winning out against anger as she looked anywhere but at us. "I was showing it to onee-chan…"

She made no move to take it from me, so I looked down at the handwritten notes, and immediately felt my blood run cold.

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THE ADVENTURES OF *(need to come up with a good heroine name)*

The story of an ordinary (but awesome, inventive and intelligent) high school girl who finds herself in the middle of an ongoing intrigue between multiple groups of supernatural beings!

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FACTION 1: ALIENS! *Members of an alien hive-mind, each one representing a different personality and temperament. Look like normal girls, but with weird hair colors.*

(1) GOOD: Stoic, silent girl (Ayanami Rei type), loves books, bad social skills, shows no emotions but secretly a softie. Total badass fighter.

(2) NEUTRAL: Student-council politician girl, all about rules and procedures, kind of forgettable but always in the background making things happen.

(3) EVIL: Popular girl archetype, class rep, everyone loves her but deep down she's completely psychotic. Also a badass fighter.

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FACTION 2: TIME TRAVELERS! *People from the future who have come to help make history happen the way THEY want it to.*

(1) Super-moe senpai-type with big boobs and a baby face. Was sent to the past without knowing that her superior officer giving her the mission is actually HERSELF!

(2)

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FACTION 3: SLIDERS! *People from other dimensions, riding the space-time continuum to see how people lived in worlds like their own!*

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FACTION 4: PSYCHICS/ESPERS! *Shady organization of mind-readers who have most of their powers on the ASTRAL PLANE, where they fight monsters created by negative emotions!*

(1) Hottie mysterious transfer student (needs "Koi" somewhere in his name!) who becomes the love interest for the heroine, but is so hot that even some of the guys want him! (Maybe he's bi?) Very smart, and knows secrets about the other groups, so he can be the heroine's trusted advisor as well as being a TOTAL BABE!

At this point I looked up at Koizumi, who gave me a thin-lipped smile and nodded. "So it appears that along with having been created, I'm also a fictional character."

Not certain what I could say, I looked back at the last set of notes on the page.

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FACTION 5: UNDERWORLD! *They're a crime family (one of the GOOD crime families that actually takes care of their city), but they're also literally from the underworld!*

(1) Heiress to the family. Senpai to the heroine and in the same class as the time-traveler. Super friendly and full of energy, and sometimes helps them find adventures! Secretly a vampire!

Well, here was the explanation for Tsuruya-san, at least, though I noticed that both the "underworld" and "vampire" references were crossed out and noted with question marks, as though the author had been uncertain of whether or not to go with these added details. Just as well, I guess.

"Haruhi," I said slowly, "what prompted you to want to write this?"

"Well… *you* know," she blushed. "The real world's just so *boring!* Wouldn't it be great if this sort of thing was happening just under the surface, where you'd never know about it unless you found out by accident?"

The final realization was beginning to click into place, but even as it did, my phone started buzzing again in my pocket. I pulled it out and saw that I had an incoming call, but it could not tell from where. I clicked the receive button and held it to my ear. "Moshi moshi?"

"Kyon, where are you?" It was Hazuki-san, but her voice was garbled and the signal was full of static.

"I'm… um… Koizumi and I are with… Haruhi right now."

"Are you safe?"

"Yeah, pretty sure of that, at least."

The signal was beginning to clear up a little, but it still sounded like an international call with only one bar. "You say Suzumiya-san's there with you?"

"Yes, the same one from last night," I said, not wanting to give more information than that with Haruhi listening.

"Okay, stay put. The rest of us will come to you as soon as Tamao-chan can get us into there."

I felt like I already knew the answer to this question, but I needed confirmation. "Hazuki-san," I said evenly, "where are we right now?"

I heard Hazuki-san's tense sigh even over the static. "Believe it or not, we think you're back in this book's original version of reality."

Of course. This was the world in which Haruhi had suffered her break with reality, and had substituted something more to her liking, based on the very story-pitch I was currently holding in my hands.

Which meant, quite simply, that this middle-school girl in pajamas, staring at me with suspicion bordering on open hostility, was none other than the original Suzumiya Haruhi.

Next: How *does* one mend a break with reality?

Chapter 8

Part 8

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Within a few minutes, the bedroom of Haruhi's alleged sister had become quite crowded with the added arrival of Hazuki-san, Nagato, Asahina-san, and to my profound surprise, Tsuruya-san. I found out later that shortly after Koizumi and I disappeared into this closed space, the time travelers had made another desperate attempt to flush Asahina-san out of hiding, this time by attempting to kidnap her classmate. While we had been talking with the younger Haruhi, Hazuki-san and Kaname-san had been intercepting the would-be senpai-snatchers and getting Tsuruya-san to safety.

For her part, Tsuruya-san looked remarkably un-fazed by any of this: not the impossibilities happening around her, not the revelation that she was a fictional character who sprung from Haruhi's pre-teen imagination, and not the idea that Haruhi herself was some sort of world-altering superhuman.

In fact, the one who appeared most stunned by the whole thing was Haruhi herself, who quickly realized that four of her guests were of her own creation.

It didn't last long, of course. "So you're one of my aliens," she said, looking Nagato up and down. "The good one, I hope?"

"Trust me, she's the good one," I said before Nagato could answer. This earned me a tiny blush from the girl in question as she nodded to her creator.

"Wild," Haruhi smiled vaguely. She then approached Tsuruya-san and looked up at her. "So… are you really a vampire? I really wasn't sure if I wanted to go that way. I was leaning against it…"

"Nope, not a vampire," Tsuruya-san smiled brightly, showing her brilliant (and in some cases pointy) teeth. Those elongated canines certainly made more sense with this revelation, and I said as much.

"True," she nodded. "I guess that might be why I prefer my steak rare, too. Plus that occasional thirst for the blood of virgins, *nyoro* . Why do you think I like hanging around with you guys? You're like a whole buffet!"

Asahina-san made a tiny "meep" noise, and Tsuruya-san laughed. "Kidding!"

I certainly hoped she was. About the blood thing, not… You know what, never mind.

Haruhi then stepped closer to Koizumi and gave him a once-over as well. "Yep, definitely a hottie," she nodded, apparently satisfied with her work. "And you," she smiled at Asahina-san, who was seated at the end of the unmade bed, "are exactly what I had in mind!" She plopped down on Asahina-san's lap and pulled the other girl's arms around herself. "So how about the two of you?" she asked, looking first at me, then at Hazuki-san.

"I'm not actually a part of this story," Hazuki-san smiled thinly, standing with her arms crossed over her chest as she continued taking in the décor. "You could call me a guest star, I suppose."

"Like a crossover?" Haruhi grinned. "Neat! And you? Are you actually a slider, then?" The last was most pointedly directed at me.

"Sorry," I shrugged. "I'm… just a normal person, as far as I know."

She looked a little disappointed. "Then where do you fit in with the story?"

Believe me, Haruhi, I've been asking myself that for well over a year now.

"This is so cool," she smiled again, turning in Asahina-san's lap and hugging her as though she were the best plushie ever. "Wow, I really *did* give you huge ones, didn't I? Let's have a look!"

"A-ahh!" Asahina-san yelped as Haruhi slipped both hands under her shirt and started groping away. "Um… Suzumiya-san, please… please don't..!"

"Why not?" Haruhi asked. "You're my creation, aren't you?"

If I needed proof that this girl was actually Haruhi, she had just provided it.

I was about to say something to interrupt, but then, quite to my surprise, Asahina-san did it for me. "Well… yes, I guess I am, but… you created me to not *like* it when people do that! So… *please* stop!"

I wasn't sure which shocked me more: that Asahina-san was sticking up for herself, or that Haruhi actually stopped. "Oh…" she said, removing her hands. "Um… sorry."

"Thank you," Asahina-san smiled with relief. "Your… other self isn't so good at stopping."

"Now, that's the part I don't get," Haruhi frowned, turning back to the rest of us as she pulled Asahina-san's arms back around herself again. "So there's a *me* in this story, too? But I'm right here! Who's this other girl going around saying she's me?"

"As near as we can tell," Hazuki-san explained, "she *is* you, or at least a part of you. You created an entirely new reality, brought the rest of the world into it with you, then added in some characters of your own creation."

"Presumably to make things more… *interesting*," Koizumi chuckled, though he didn't seem particularly amused.

"But then why am I still here?" Haruhi said with what was almost a pout. "How come I'm not cruising around in that new world and enjoying all the weird stuff? That's the kind of world I always wanted!"

"In a very real sense, Suzumiya-san, you *are* in that world," Koizumi said then. "While my mental powers are by no means infallible, I can tell that you and she are two halves of a whole."

"So… what, Haru-nyan split herself in half?" Tsuruya-san asked.

Nagato sat beside Haruhi and took one of her hands, studying it carefully. "It appears that you were not willing to give yourself completely to the world you created," she said quietly. "Something is keeping you here. Something in this reality has prevented you from leaving it entirely."

At this, Haruhi began to look very uncomfortable. "But why would I want to stay here when I have the power to make a world of my own with everything I always wanted in it?"

"But it didn't have *everything* you wanted," I said as realization dawned. "That other world is missing something important to you."

"In that other world," Hazuki-san said gently, "you never had a sister, Suzumiya-san."

"What?!" Haruhi shrieked, leaping to her feet. Her face was a tangle of misery, indignation and what appeared to be the first sign of tears. "What kind of stupid world is that?! Why would I… why would I make a world without her?! *She's coming back!* She's coming back, and then we… and then we…"

The tears were flowing freely now, and for a moment, I think everyone in the room moved in as though to hug the distressed girl (including, to my chagrin, myself). In the end, though, it was Hazuki-san who caught her and held her tightly, placing one arm across her back and the other hand to the nape of her neck. A soft green glow

appeared from this point of contact, and Haruhi's shaking began to subside.

"Suzumiya-san," Hazuki-san whispered, "do you know who your sister was? Who she *truly* was?"

"What do you mean?" Haruhi answered, still struggling to sound indignant. "She was my onee-chan, and she was my best friend, and she listened to my stories and encouraged me to be a writer, and…"

"But do you know who she really was?" Hazuki-san asked again when Haruhi trailed off. In reply, Haruhi simply shook her head against Hazuki-san's chest.

"Who was she, then?" I asked, because someone needed to.

Hazuki-san looked annoyed for a moment: that now-familiar expression that seemed to come up whenever she ran up against her version of "classified information." She then knelt in front of Haruhi and took both of her hands, smiling softly. "I can't tell you that now, but… I promise you, Suzumiya-san: you *will* see her again. There's something else the rest of us need to do first, but you'll definitely have that chance. I'll make sure of it. Okay?"

"Who are you, anyway?" Haruhi asked, wiping her eyes. "I knew I wanted sliders in my story, but I never had any strong ideas for an actual slider *character* . I'm *sure* I'd have remembered coming up with someone like you."

"You could say I'm your long-lost sister from another world," Hazuki-san chuckled, brushing a lock of Haruhi's hair back behind her ear. "You have more of us than you know, and we're all pulling for you."

Haruhi gripped Hazuki-san's hands, and that soft light intensified. "I believe you," she whispered. She then squared her jaw. "What do you need me to do?"

"Just keep waiting here," Hazuki-san smiled. "I know you've been waiting a long time, but it won't be much longer. Your other self… isn't ready to believe yet. We'll do what we can to help her, too."

"My other self is obviously an idiot," Haruhi scowled, quickly getting some of her attitude back. Resilient as always.

"Actually, there *is* one other thing I need from you," Hazuki-san nodded, squeezing Haruhi's hands. "I know all too well that this is a painful memory, but… can you show me where she was when she disappeared?"

Haruhi pressed her lips together in a tight frown, but nodded all the same. She crossed the room to the still-open window and stepped out onto the roof of the garage. Hazuki-san followed first, with the rest of us more or less trailing behind her.

"Right here," said Haruhi in a low voice, standing on what was more or less the center of the roof. I looked down toward the street corner from where Koizumi and I had spotted her not so very long ago, and wondered if this was the very same spot upon which "our" Haruhi had been standing. Still, we were an equal distance from any of the edges: how could anyone have jumped from here?

Hazuki-san looked deep in thought for a moment, then nodded curtly, as if finally coming to a decision. "Asahina-san," she asked, turning to the rest of us, "we have need of your abilities."

"My abilities?" Asahina-san asked. "But- but I thought you said my time travel wasn't… wasn't really time travel?"

"Someone else will be helping you," Hazuki-san smiled gently. "You see, time travel within a single reality actually *is* possible, but it's not quite the way you're familiar with. What I'm more concerned with here, though, is your ability to mask us all from sight. Can you do that?"

"I… I think so," Asahina-san nodded, though she looked a bit doubtful. Only Asahina-san could possibly make self-doubt look so cute.

"Get ready, then," Hazuki-san nodded, then turned back to Haruhi. "We need to go now, Suzumiya-san."

Haruhi crossed her arms and looked up at the much taller Hazuki-san. "You just make sure you remember your promise."

"I will," Hazuki-san assured her. "Okay, everyone back up and stand close to the wall. Asahina-san, get ready to hide us."

"Wait!" Haruhi shouted. She then very purposefully strode into the midst of us and stood in front of me. "John Smith, huh? You're really not one of my characters at all, are you?"

No, I'm just someone who's been inexorably pulled along for the ride.

"In that case, I want you to pass along a message to my other self," she frowned, briefly putting her hands on her hips. "Tell her that if she's forgotten our sister, I'll never forgive her! And give her this." That said, she reached around to the back of her neck and began unhooking something. A few seconds later she pulled a pendant on a silver chain out from her pajama shirt and set it in my hand. "Maybe this'll jog her memory."

"I'll do that," I promised her, though perhaps I wouldn't use those exact words…

Haruhi stepped away, and Hazuki-san began making a call on her phone. "Hello, Tamao-chan?" she said to her invisible girlfriend. "I trust you've been listening? Good, good. I'll put Asahina-san on." She then held out the phone to Asahina-san. "This is the Tamao I was telling you about. She's going to guide you as we go back in time."

"How far back are we going?" Koizumi asked.

"About four years," Hazuki-san replied. "We're going back to five minutes before the wall your time travelers couldn't go past."

"But… we shouldn't be able to do that!" Asahina-san gasped.

"From the reality we were in, perhaps," Nagato pointed out.

"Ah, I see," Koizumi nodded in understanding. "We have been living in a world with no history prior to that date, but if we are now truly within the baseline reality…"

"Precisely," Hazuki-san nodded. "Now, Asahina-san, if you would be so kind as to shield us all, we'll get started."

There was a slight shift in the atmosphere around us, indicative of Asahina-san's power activating and "cloaking" us from sight. I looked over at Haruhi, who had been watching us from a distance, but whose eyes had now gone wide, presumably at our disappearance.

"Understood," Asahina-san said into the phone, then. "Thank you, Suzumi-san. I'm ready. Should I have the others close their-"

Before she could finish the sentence, the world sort of went away around us. The roof, the house, the neighborhood, and even the featureless sky dissolved into so much smoke. I felt a hand slip into mine, and was a bit surprised to see Nagato standing beside me. Whether she had done it for my sake or her own, I was grateful to have something solid to hold onto.

"Amazing!" Asahina-san gasped from nearby. "How is this happening, Suzumi-san? Are those pages I hear turning?"

All of a sudden there was a jolt, as though reality itself had gone over a pothole in the road. Asahina-san let out a squeak of surprise, and Nagato's grip tightened on my hand. Next came a rush of hot wind that seemed to blow all the scattered smoke back into place, and the scene reformed around us. We were still standing on the roof of the Suzumiyas' garage, but the silence of closed space had been

replaced by the sound of insects and distant cars, and the sky was clear and filled with as many stars as the ambient light of the city would allow.

"Wild ride," Tsuruya-san said, sounding deeply impressed.

"Are we back in… the real world?" Koizumi asked.

"It's… it's eleven-fifty-six p.m.," Asahina-san said, looking slightly dazed. "The night before… before…"

"Before the world changed?" I asked. Oddly, I found myself feeling like the veteran of the group, having been through something like this once before when the world had been altered by Nagato.

Speaking of Nagato, she was showing no sign of letting go of my hand.

"I was going to say before the world *began*," Asahina-san replied, passing Hazuki-san the phone, "but I suppose that works too."

"Keep us out of sight, please," Hazuki-san said quietly as she stepped up to one of the windows and peeked inside. "It should all begin in a couple of minutes."

After slipping my hand from Nagato's as gently as I could, I stepped closer to the window. For a moment, it occurred to me that I was peeping into a girl's bedroom in the middle of the night, but that was when I saw… *her*…

It was still a bedroom, and still decorated as though it were a fantasy forest, but there were now two girls lying in the bed. I was reminded of the dream in which I had seen Mutsumi-san holding a younger Haruhi, and indeed the pose was exactly the same as that vision had been, but in place of Mutsumi-san was someone I had never seen before.

She was beautiful: almost unsettlingly so, like Lilith had been. She had long, straight blonde hair that lay spread out across her pillow like a golden cloud. Even from this distance and with nothing more than a bedside light for illumination, I could tell that her skin was pale and flawless, and her figure… well, let's just say womanly and be done with it. Haruhi, dressed in the same pajamas as the girl we'd just seen moments before, was holding the other girl tightly, her face buried against a chest that would best be called ample.

I chanced a glance at Hazuki-san, and the look on her face was something I had never seen from her: she looked troubled, but also bitterly resigned. "Come on," she said to me, taking me by the arm. "We need to stay back, and keep out of sight."

At that moment, the girl who could only have been Haruhi's sister stirred, and began carefully disentangling herself from the smaller girl holding onto her. Hazuki-san pulled me toward a corner of the rooftop, where the others were already standing. Moments later, the bedroom window opened, and the unknown girl stepped barefoot onto the roof. There was an almost ethereal quality to her as she glided to the center, her skin bathed in moonlight and her impossibly brief silk nightie rustling in the light breeze.

I heard a small gasp, and to my surprise it appeared to have come from Nagato, who was staring wide-eyed at the young woman. "That's…" she whispered.

"Yes," Hazuki whispered in reply. "Asahina-san, how close to midnight are we now?"

"Twenty seconds," Asahina-san said in a tiny voice, unable to take her eyes from the moonlit girl.

For her part, the stranger was looking up at the sky, a neutral, even guarded expression on her face. Eventually, though, she closed her eyes and spread her arms to either side, palms pointed skyward.

"Five, four…" Asahina-san whispered.

"Nee-chan!" a voice suddenly called. I looked back to the open window to see the younger Haruhi leaning out, with both hands braced on the sill. "What are you-?!"

"Midnight," said Asahina-san.

The girl on the roof suddenly began to glow from within, washing the scene with a soft green light similar to the ones I had seen several times in the past few days: the *Souma* that was both the sliders' power, and the substance from which Asahina-san, Tsuruya-san and Koizumi were created. Her feet gently pushed off, and she began to hover in place as a wind I could not feel began whipping through her hair, while sparks trailed from her open hands.

" *Nee-chan!"* Haruhi said again, this time in a scream, and dashed out from the window to throw her arms around her sister. She, too, was quickly enveloped in the glow as she struggled with all her might to keep her grip on the other girl. The fair-haired sister said nothing, but her body began to grow translucent as she became a creature of light herself.

" *Nee-chan, stop!"* Haruhi shrieked with obvious terror. " *Don't leave me! Please, don't leave me!"* From the corner of my eye I saw Hazuki-san look away for a moment, a pained expression on her face, before she forced herself to keep watching.

The glowing girl was beginning to pulse now, but then so was Haruhi, lighting up each time her sister faded and vice-versa. For a moment, it seemed like both of them might fade away, but then Haruhi collapsed to the rooftop as the other girl literally dissolved in her arms, turning into a streak of light that ascended heavenward before fading away without a trace.

There was the sound of soft, ragged weeping, and I looked back down to see Haruhi lying crumpled upon the tiled surface, shivering violently, her eyes wide open and staring into nothing. It was such an alien expression on that familiar face that I once again wanted to rush forward to comfort the obviously distraught girl: anyone with half

a heart would have done the same. As though sensing this, Hazuki-san held one arm out in a "stay back" gesture. "I know how you feel, but we can't interfere with this," she said softly.

Haruhi eventually pushed herself to her hands and knees and stared unblinking up into the sky, where her sister had vanished. She began to slowly shake her head as her breathing grew quick and labored, and finally, she screamed. " *NO!"*

"Here it comes," Hazuki-san whispered. "Asahina-san, give me your hand."

There was another one of those jolting sensations, as though the entire world had begun to shake around us, but then Asahina-san took the offered hand, and the feeling diminished as her power anchored us in place. The shake seemed to have knocked the scenery loose around us, however, as everything except the group of us seemed to be a double-image, like a bad visual feed on an old television.

Haruhi's scream faded, leaving her lying curled in a fetal position, also in double. As we watched, one of the two eventually staggered to her feet, her face devoid of expression, and shuffled back toward the window. She climbed into a room that now very much resembled a home office, then slowly shut the window behind her, leaving it both open and closed. The other Haruhi, meanwhile, lay there shivering.

"That was it," Asahina-san gasped. "That was where the world we know split off."

"Somewhere out there, we're coming into existence," Koizumi said quietly.

"Let's go," Hazuki-san said in a rough whisper. "We've seen what we needed to see."

A few minutes later, we were in the closed-space equivalent of the coffee shop Koizumi and I had visited not so very long ago. While there was no coffee to speak of, at least it gave us a table at which we could all sit and ask questions.

I decided to let my question be first. "So who was she?" I asked. "Haruhi's sister, I mean. Who… no, *what* was she?"

Hazuki-san closed her eyes, obviously biting back on her words, but to my surprise it was Nagato who answered. "Eve," she whispered. "Suzumiya Haruhi's sister was an incarnation of the life-giving goddess, Eve: the one who gave me my human body."

"Thank you," Hazuki-san sighed in obvious relief as Nagato's answer was met with a chorus of gasps. "I was specifically forbidden to tell you that, but they never said anything about letting you figure it out on your own." She then reached across the table to give Nagato's hand a pat. "Don't worry, Nagato-san, if anyone's going to get in trouble here it'll be me."

"Haru-nyan's sister was a goddess?" Tsuruya-san asked. "Neat!"

"But… for what reason was a goddess living in this world and acting out the role of a teenage girl?" Koizumi asked.

"Her reasons… aren't important," Hazuki-san said carefully. "What's important was that she lived out a human life in the person of Suzumiya-san's older sister, and disappeared from this world on midnight of her sixteenth birthday. That was the moment you just witnessed."

"Did Suzumiya-san's powers come from Eve, then?" Asahina-san asked. "Was just… living with a goddess enough to make her this powerful?"

Hazuki-san looked like she was about to say something, but Nagato beat her to it. "I sensed only a tiny trace of *Souma* within Suzumiya

Haruhi before she attempted to disrupt Eve's ascension. During that event, Suzumiya Haruhi's body was saturated with creative energy."

I remembered the alternating pulses of green between the two sisters as Haruhi desperately held on. "So just by being next to her when she was leaving, she gained some of Eve's power?"

"That's how it generally works, yes," Hazuki-san nodded.

Generally?

"Do you remember what Chikaru and I told you that first time you came over to my apartment?" Hazuki-san asked me. "About how there are *Souma* bearers scattered throughout some of the books in the Great Library? Other than a few special cases, we were all given our energy in much the same way. If we were in her direct presence when she disappeared, we retained a sliver of her power."

The earlier pained expression on Hazuki-san's face suddenly made sense: obviously she had experienced this traumatic loss for herself. Was the same true for Chikaru-san? Ryofu-san? Rushuna-san?

"Then… how many mortal incarnations has Eve had?" Koizumi asked.

"Not my place to answer that," Hazuki-san said with a shake of her head. "And also not relevant to the current problem. What *is* relevant is that Haruhi gained a tremendous amount of *Souma* from Eve's disappearance, far surpassing any of our other sisters, and she immediately used it in one of the most brutal ways possible, shaking this world to its very foundations, and rewriting it to an extent that only Lilith should be capable."

"But… why split the world like she did?" Asahina-san asked. "Why not just rewrite the existing one?"

"I think I see why…" Koizumi said, nodding softly to himself. As always, he seemed to be the first to dive into the esoteric answers,

but this time at least he was not doing so in his normal self-assured tone. "Think of the younger Suzumiya-san we met tonight. She longed for a world filled with strange and wondrous things."

"So does the Haruhi *we* know," I reminded him.

"True, but bear with me," he continued. "A younger Suzumiya-san, longing for evidence of the world being a miraculous place, is suddenly traumatized by the very supernatural disappearance of her beloved sister. Instead of taking this as a sign that the world is, in fact, far from the mundane place she fears it is, she immediately goes into denial, creating a world modeled after her recent story project. Now she has a world whose unseen secrets are very real, just as she always wanted, but she arranges things so that she herself can never witness them, even as they are happening all around her." He then gave me an odd smile. "And then you enter the picture, my friend, and are immediately thrust into the position of experiencing these dreams in her stead."

"Think about your three factions," Hazuki-san added. "What was one of the biggest rules that all three of them had? Suzumiya-san could never find out about you, out of fear that it might trigger something in her powers that would end the world as you know it. She stacked the deck from the beginning. Maybe she knew, subconsciously, that to actually *see* supernatural events taking place would make her want to end the world again. The way things were, she got her wish to have a world full of strangeness, but as long as she couldn't *see* it, she could go on denying the loss of her sister."

I felt like I mostly knew the answer to my next question, but asked it anyway. "Then what about closed spaces? Those were her subconscious desire to destroy the world, weren't they?"

"Maybe she was never really satisfied with the world she made?" Asahina-san suggested. "Maybe she knew, deep down, that something was missing."

Koizumi nodded and smiled wanly. "Leaving us with a younger Suzumiya-san, waiting patiently and agelessly in an eternal night for her sister to return, and an older Suzumiya-san struggling to find meaning in a world that she knows, somehow, is wrong."

There was a short pause, and then Tsuruya-san actually frowned. "Okays, I still don't understand most of this, but that just *sucks* . How can we help Haru-nyan?"

"Our hope," Hazuki-san said in a very deliberate voice, "was that we might be able to gently ease her along to a point where she could meet Eve again without the world self-destructing around her. We considered just kidnapping her to the Great Library and ripping off the bandage, so to speak, but her *Souma* is so deeply ingrained in this world by now that the damage would be… indescribable. Somehow we need to convince *our* Suzumiya-san that it really is okay for the world to be a miraculous place after all, and then maybe she'll be ready to meet the goddess who used to be her sister."

"And how exactly are we supposed to do that?" I asked.

"Maybe she needs to hear it from someone important to her," Koizumi suggested.

"Someone whose judgment she trusts," Nagato added.

"Someone… who knows how to reach her…" Asahina-san continued.

All well and good in theory, of course, but who in the world would fit *those* requirements?

There was an unsettlingly long silence.

"Why are you all looking at me?" I asked.

After what was subjectively a few minutes, but which actually involved nearly four years of time travel and some hopping between onion layers, the five of us were standing on Haruhi's lawn, still protected by Asahina-san's cloak. It was several hours later than when we had originally left, but Haruhi was still standing out on the roof, looking skyward, just as she had been earlier in the day, and just as her younger self had been in that closed space.

"I'm open for suggestions," I said sourly.

"You know her better than any of us," Koizumi reminded me. "Even those of us who monitor her emotional state lack some of your insights."

Lovely. So all I needed to do was to convince Haruhi *once again* that not only was the world worth saving, but that she needed to confront a loss that had literally caused her to fracture reality. What could possibly go wrong?

"Um, Kyon-kun..?" Asahina-san said in a shaky voice.

I turned to face her, and she was fidgeting in place, obviously fighting to get the words out. "What is it, Asahina-san?"

She was gradually turning a deeper and deeper shade of red. "Um, I just wanted to say that… um… I'm sorry that I couldn't… I mean I thought that I couldn't… I mean… ohhhh, *good luck, Kyon-kun!* "

With that, she launched herself at me, threw her arms around my shoulders, and pulled me into the kiss I'd always dreamed of. For just a moment, the rest of the world went away. There was no apocalypse to avert, no goddess to appease, and no world-saving speech to deliver: there was only the impossibly warm feeling of Asahina-san's divine lips on my own.

Finally, though, she took a step back. She was still blushing, but her smile was the brilliance of the sun. "I've… um, I've wanted to do that for a while," she admitted.

There was a light tug at my sleeve, and I turned to see Nagato standing beside me. "I desire to associate myself with this wish for good fortune," she said quietly, then hooked two fingers in the collar of my shirt, pulled me down to her level, and kissed me as well.

Maybe the end of the world wouldn't be so bad, if it involved moments like these. I had often wondered what kissing Nagato would be like: would her lips be as cold as her eyes had once been? Maybe that would have been the case before, but no longer. I will not do either of them the disservice of wondering which kiss was the *better* one, but to experience both in short succession like this was nothing less than the stuff of legend.

We broke, and I took a dazed look around, still in shock. When the haze cleared from my eyes, I found myself staring at a grinning Tsuruya-san.

"Oh, are we all kissing Kyon-kun for luck?" she chirped. "What the heck, I'm game!" She then stepped up to me, put her arms up around my neck, and leaned in to administer my third kiss in less than a minute. I have to admit that at this point I was more or less gone. One of her fangs lightly grazed my lower lip as she pulled away, and in retrospect, that was actually kind of hot. In the moment, though, it was all I could do to look away from her smirking face.

And wouldn't you know it, my eyes met Koizumi's.

To his credit, he gave a somewhat resigned shrug. "Well, if you think it would help, I'll try anything at this point."

No, Koizumi, that won't be necessary. I wrenched my eyes from his and found myself looking up at Hazuki-san.

"Lesbian," she reminded me.

"Okay, okay, I'm going!" I said, somewhat louder than I needed to. Taking a deep breath to center myself as much as I could, I stepped out of Asahina-san's circle of protection and into the evening air.

Before I could get too far, though, I took one last look back, suddenly mindful of the horrifying thought that if things went poorly, this might be the last time I saw most of them. Tsuruya-san was hugging Asahina-san from behind, with her chin on the shorter girl's shoulder, and she appeared to be whispering something to her, while Asahina-san herself was holding one of Nagato's hands tightly in her own. Koizumi stood straight and tall, arms crossed over his chest, his earlier look of exhaustion gone for the moment. Lastly, Hazuki-san stood in a pose that mirrored Koizumi's, but when she saw me looking back she gave a small nod, and an even smaller (but still very real) smile.

Well, then. Nothing else to do at this point but get on with it. I'd just need to find a way to let Haruhi know I was here without startling her, and…

"Kyon, what are you doing down there?" came Haruhi's voice from above.

I really should have known better.

"I could ask the same of you," I said, trying to recover some shred of my composure as I looked up to see her still standing at the center of the roof, but looking down at me quizzically.

"What's that supposed to mean?" she huffed. "I live here, you dolt."

"Yes, but isn't it a bit cold to be looking for comets again? Especially since you were sick today?"

She looked away, still frowning. "There's a ladder around back," she said at length.

The answer felt like a non-sequitur, especially since she could access the roof from her bedroom window and thus would not *need* a ladder. It took me a moment to realize that she had just, in her own inimitable fashion, invited me up to join her. I circled around behind the garage and climbed the indicated ladder to find myself once

again standing on the Suzumiyas' garage rooftop. Haruhi, by this time, was seated on one side of a folded blanket, with just enough room on the other side for me to sit down as well. Without waiting for further permission, I did so.

For a long time, I followed her gaze into the starry night, mulling over what I should say. It came as no surprise, however, when she started the conversation. "Hey, Kyon?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you… really think there could be weird things out there like… like aliens and stuff?"

"Sure," I nodded. "It would be an awfully big universe for just us." Never mind bookcase after bookcase of other universes…

"What about things like time travelers, or mind-readers, or people from other dimensions?"

"They could be all around us for all we know," I replied, then tentatively added: "That wouldn't be bad, would it? Isn't that the sort of thing you've always wanted to find?"

She said nothing, and when I looked over at her, I saw that her face wore an uncommonly troubled expression.

"I guess it is…" she finally said, in a voice just over a whisper.

Right. If I was going to do this, I needed to get on with it. "Who knows? Maybe there are extraordinary people in the world after all. Maybe they cross our paths for a while, change our lives for the better, and then move on. Maybe they're here to teach us something, but they can't interfere too much because they have their own rules to follow. Maybe… maybe everyone you know, and everyone you ever *have* known has the chance of having been one of them." I paused, realizing I might be laying it on a bit thick. "But if they don't

mean us any harm, then… we should just enjoy them for what they are."

I wasn't really making any sense to myself, even, so I trailed off. Silence stretched out between us, and when Haruhi finally spoke next, there was something almost broken about her voice. "So… which one of them are *you*, then?"

I froze.

"Um… what do you mean by that?"

She slowly turned toward me, and I could feel the weight of her gaze, even though her expression remained completely neutral. "I asked… which one of them *are* you… John Smith?"

If ever there existed a time when I knew I had to be *very* careful of my next words, this was it. Unfortunately, the best I could come up with was: "How long have you known?" Well done. It was nice knowing you, world. I could only hope that Lilith would be a merciful goddess after all.

To my surprise, though, Haruhi gave me just the hint of a smile before looking back at the sky. "I… think I've kind of known all along," she said softly. "You seemed familiar right from that first day we met in school, and… I guess I kind of hoped it was you, somehow… but you never acknowledged me." She gave a small chuckle. "Why do you think I was so annoyed with you all the time? I think I… I think I wanted to believe that you were the one I'd met on Tanabata, and that you were just *acting* like we'd never met before."

"Well… we hadn't," I managed. "At least, not from my point of view. That came… later."

She chewed on that for a while. "So you're a time traveler?"

"Does it matter?"

"Of course it matters, idiot."

I sighed. "Not through any power of my own. I'm afraid that I'm as normal as they get; I've just had a lot of strange things happen to me." The sort of strange things that you always said you wanted to happen to *you*, I almost added, but held my tongue.

"So… they're real then?" she asked, haltingly.

"I'm afraid so."

"Aliens and psychics too?"

"All that and more. I get the feeling I haven't seen it all just yet."

"And they…" She paused, swallowed, and when she spoke again her voice was more desolate than I'd ever heard it. "They come… and they go?"

"I think that's how it usually works, yeah."

Her eyes were beginning to mist over. "But… what if I don't *want* them to go?"

"I don't think it's up to us," I sighed. "I'm sure they all have their own laws, or their own things that they can't tell us. It doesn't make any of it less…" I bit back the last word, then closed my eyes and said it anyway: "… real."

"That's not fair," she whispered.

"No, not really," I agreed. "But I think the time we have with them is still worth it, even if… they have to leave us one day."

She nodded slowly, then looked back at me. "How about you, then?" she asked. "When will *you* leave me?"

When I looked into her eyes, I finally recognized it: the expression that had so long been her hallmark was not melancholy at all.

It was loneliness.

"Well…" I said, reaching around to scratch the back of my neck, "I don't have any sort of cosmic plan pulling me away, so I think you might be stuck with me for a while, at least. You, me, Nagato, Koizumi, Asahina-san, Tsuruya-san… somehow I think we're all in it for the long haul." Please let it be the long haul. Please don't let this be an ending.

Another single chuckle, and then she leaned over and rested her head on my shoulder. "You'd better be."

"Will there be a penalty otherwise?"

"Such that your so-called normal mind could never fathom," she said in a voice that was half humor and half menace.

We sat like that for several minutes, and I felt my pulse gradually get back to something resembling normal. No apocalypse yet, I noted.

"I bet you have some stories you could tell," she finally said.

"A few. Are you asking to hear them?"

She shook her head against me. "Not yet," she said. "Right now… it's just enough to know. I'm going to need some time to think about this."

"Should I leave you to your thoughts, then?"

Another long-ish pause. "Probably," she said, though she sounded somewhat reluctant. "I think I need to be alone for a while."

She sat back away from me, and as I was about to stand up and head back to the others, I suddenly remembered that I had a promise to keep. "Actually, before I go, someone asked me to give you something." I reached into my coat pocket and pulled out the necklace given to me in the so-called original world.

Her expression betrayed no surprise as I lowered it into her hand, though I think she recognized it. "Who gave this to you?" she asked.

At this point, I figured I was all in. "You did."

She nodded, playing with the pendant between her fingers. Then, to my surprise, she popped it open: it had not been a pendant at all, but a locket, and there inside was a picture of a younger Haruhi with the goddess who had been her sister, both smiling radiantly at the older girl who had tried so hard to forget them both.

"Thank you," Haruhi whispered.

She said nothing more, so I stood up, dusted myself off, and headed back toward the ladder, finding myself both reluctant and strangely eager to return to the others and await the fate of the world.

Before I could lower myself more than a few rungs, though, I took a look back to see that Haruhi was standing again, looking wistfully into the sky. As if on cue, a falling star streaked through the night.

Then, as I watched, a ghostly half-image emerged from one of the bedroom windows and stepped out toward her: it was the younger Haruhi, from the "real" world. In moments, both of them were standing in that same spot where the goddess had disappeared four years ago, watching the stars as I now knew they had done hundreds of times, waiting for the return of a sister she missed, and a goddess she could not let herself remember.

But then, to my amazement, a dazzling light appeared in the sky and slowly lowered itself toward the rooftop. As it descended, it gradually began to take on a shape, but looking at it was like staring into the sun, and I had to momentarily shield my eyes from the brilliance.

Instead, I looked at Haruhi, who was staring open-mouthed at the female form that was now extending a hand to her. Though I had only seen the girl once, I immediately recognized her as Eve, the life-giving goddess, in all her glory and magnificence.

This was it, I realized: this was the moment of which Hazuki had spoken. Would Haruhi embrace and forgive her long-lost sister, or would she deny her again, and hide away in yet another world of her own making?

Had we done enough?

No more than a second passed, but it felt like forever. Finally, though, both Haruhis' faces broke into a smile of pure joy as the light washed over them, and both of them reached up to take the goddess's offered hand. As soon as they touched, I could feel the world shake around me as it had done during our trip to the past, and everything went blurry for a moment before snapping back into perfect focus. The life-bearer and the now-unified Haruhi shone brighter and brighter, until I could see nothing more than the green of new leaves.

Eventually that too passed, and I could see nothing at all.

To be concluded

Epilogue

Epilogue

When I woke up, the world was significantly less green. In fact, the world looked an awful lot like my bedroom.

Recent events bull-rushed my conscious mind, and I sat bolt upright in bed. I was home. I was in pajamas. It was dim, but not the largely colorless dimness of a closed space. I rushed toward my window and threw open the curtains, revealing a nice, normal, pleasant morning.

Apparently the world had not ended.

I let myself sigh with relief before I looked over at my bedside clock and saw that I had overslept significantly: if I didn't get out of the house right the hell now, I'd be late for school.

I got dressed as quickly as I could manage, then grabbed my phone and flipped it open, hoping that maybe one of the sliders or someone else had left me a message explaining what had happened after Haruhi's reunion with her long-lost goddess sister.

Not only were there no messages, but there was no screen at all. The battery was dead. Whatever force had returned me to my bedroom had not done me the common courtesy of plugging my phone into its charger.

"Suzumi-san?" I asked quietly. "Are you listening?"

No answer. Not from the phone, or anywhere else. I began to feel a very familiar dread creeping in like thunderclouds.

The world had not ended… but which world was it?

When I arrived in class, the first person I saw (because I was specifically looking for her) was Haruhi, sitting at her usual seat and resting her head in her arms atop her desk. There was something all too familiar about the pose, and when I took my seat in front of her, I saw that she looked exhausted. "Um… long night?" I asked her.

"I was looking for comets," she muttered.

I almost choked. "Comets?" I managed.

She popped her head up and grinned sleepily at me. "Comets! Or asteroids, maybe, but comets are prettier. Do you know how many comets have been discovered by amateur astronomers over the years, Kyon? Also, did you know that they name the comet for its discoverer? There are worse ways to be immortalized than that, you know. I could go for having a Comet Suzumiya, especially if it ended up being one of those ones that comes back on schedule every few years."

Oh, no…

Had the world not been saved at all… but *reset?* Were we going to have to go through all of this *again?*

Then, Haruhi's smile softened, and she reached into the collar of her uniform to pull out a silver chain with a pendant hanging from it. "I wonder if they'd let me give the comet a *full* name, though? I… think there's another Suzumiya who deserves to have a comet named after her more than me…" There was a wistful tone to her voice, and maybe a hint of sadness in her eyes, but the smile remained.

Before the implications could set in, the class representative made the call to stand and bow to the sensei. We did so, and I as I took my seat, I could not completely hold back my gasp as I saw that the room had a visitor.

There was a girl seated in front of the blackboard, facing the class. She wore a Kitago uniform, and had a bookbag in her lap. She had

shoulder-length black hair, with part of it tied into a single braid and decorated with a pink scarf. Even from this distance I could see that her eyes were rose-colored and piercing.

"Good morning, everyone," the sensei addressed us, pausing to stifle a yawn. "We have two announcements this morning. First, many of you will likely remember Asakura Ryōko, who moved to Canada with her family last year. She will be returning to us next week."

"Also, as you can see, we have a new student, who will be joining us starting today." He then turned toward her. "Please introduce yourself, and then we'll find you a seat."

I could almost hear Haruhi grinning. "Mysterious!" she whispered. "A return *and* a transfer on the same day?"

By this time, the new girl had finished writing her name on the board. " *Hajimemashite,"* she said with a bow. Her voice was soft and feminine, but carried obvious strength: I believe the metaphor is steel wrapped in silk. "My name is Sakuragi Kaori. *Yoroshiku onegaishimasu* ."

As the sensei indicated a seat for her on the other side of the room, I could feel Haruhi's presence at my shoulder. "Oh, I am *so* recruiting her…"

The day's lessons had an uncanny familiarity to them, but I barely heard them over the noise in my own head. Obviously we were replaying the day that Hazuki-san had arrived, but with several critical differences. Haruhi had the necklace I had been given by her younger self, and by her earlier words, she was no longer in denial about the sister she had lost. Hazuki-san herself had been replaced by another transfer student, possibly another one of the sliders: I remembered that someone with the name KAORI.S had communicated with me over my phone, and Sakuragi *might* have

been the name that Nagato had said when listing the people she'd met in the Great Library, but I couldn't remember it clearly enough to be sure.

And Asakura was due to come back next week, just as Kimidori-san had threatened when last we had seen her. What did that mean? Was Nagato still human? Was she still here at all?

Were *any* of them still here? Or with Haruhi now apparently at peace with the trauma of having lost her sister, had any of them even come into being? No, they must have, or else Asakura wouldn't exist either.

Ironically, I was finding myself relieved at the existence of Asakura. Strange days indeed.

What I really needed was to find Koizumi so he could explain everything, like usual. As soon as we reached the first break, and Haruhi immediately descended upon Sakuragi-san, I waved off Tanaguchi and Kunikida and made my way out of the room. Koizumi would be there: if Asakura were coming back, then he had to be there too.

To my profound relief, Koizumi was already waiting outside the door. He gave me a knowing smile and a nod.

"You're… okay," I said. Well, in truth I kind of sighed, but it's embarrassing to admit it.

His smile quirked to one side. "Were you concerned?"

"Yeah, don't get used to it."

"Perish the thought. Come on, I'll buy you a coffee."

We adjourned to one of the tables outside, where we had shared several denouements in the past. Koizumi looked more relaxed than I had seen him in seemingly forever, and it appeared to be more

genuine than his usual mask. "So it appears that at the end of the story, Pinocchio became a real boy after all," he chuckled.

Come again?

"Like Nagato, I have now been given a fully human body, rather than a construct derived from the *Souma* of Suzumiya Haruhi."

Asahina-san and Tsuruya-san as well, then?

"I believe so," he nodded. "It was all a blur, really, after Eve appeared in the sky. Speaking of which, I owe you a debt of thanks: obviously you were able to say the correct things to Suzumiya-san. The world she created was successfully merged with the original reality, Lilith rewound the clock a few days, and here we all are."

"Does Haruhi remember anything?" I asked, mindful of the fact that part of those "correct things" was admitting that I was John Smith.

"She remembers none of the events of the past weekend, if that's what you mean, but she does remember her childhood with Eve."

Then we needed to continue the masquerade? Was it still necessary, for the world's stability, to keep Haruhi in the dark?

"Perhaps not," he said. "Before I can properly answer that, though, I should detail some of the changes that have come about."

"Please do."

" *Ya-ho!"* came a shout, and seemingly out of nowhere, Tsuruya-san appeared on the scene and almost tackled Koizumi where he was sitting. "Heyas! Getting Kyon-kun up to speed?"

"Ah, Tsuruya-san," Koizumi flushed at the unexpected familiarity, returning our senpai to arms' length as gently as he could manage. "Yes, I was just explaining about…"

"About how we have these neat magic powers now?" Tsuruya-san grinned, putting her hand over Koizumi's and causing a brief flash of green before he managed to fend her off. " *Eeeee*, that feels so *cool!* Gonna be hard to keep my hands off of you guys!"

"Yes, well… please try," Koizumi grimaced. "Until we better understand these… gifts… we should not advertise their presence to the rest of the world."

"I know, I know," Tsuruya-san laughed, backing off a little bit. "Believe it or not, I'm pretty good at keeping secrets. Guess this means I need to give in to fate and quit the Calligraphy Club, though. Somehow, I always knew I'd end up with you guys eventually. Anyway, gotta run!" At this point she shot me a wink. "Keep working on your kissing game, Kyon-kun! I betcha Mikuru-chan would be glad to help!"

And then, with a wave and a flourish, she was dashing back toward the main building in her own inimitable style, leaving Koizumi and myself stunned in her wake.

"So where were we?" he ventured.

"The changes that have come about."

He checked his watch. "We've got about three minutes, so I'll have to give you the highlights. During their encounter, Eve reclaimed much of the *Souma* that she had inadvertently bestowed upon Suzumiya-san. Not all of it, mind you, but enough that Suzumiya-san should no longer be a threat to the world, or the book that contains it."

"Oh…" I said, somewhat surprised. Come to think of it, though, I hadn't really given much consideration to the final solution. I suppose I expected that Lilith and Eve would leave Haruhi completely powerless.

"This, of course, has had a significant ripple effect," he went on. "The Organization, as well, has lost a significant amount of its power. You

are now looking at the most powerful remaining member, as unlike the others, my abilities have not diminished."

"What does that mean for you?"

"I'm not yet certain," he said. "As the Organization slowly comes to terms with the idea that our constant vigilance over Suzumiya-san is no longer necessary, perhaps we shall dissolve our current ties, or simply change our focus." He smiled, then. "However, as the aforementioned most powerful remaining member, I should have no trouble convincing my superiors that I am uniquely qualified to remain here at the side of Suzumiya-san… where I belong."

That seemed like a loaded statement. Was he finally going to make good on his attraction to our leader, now that the world was no longer at stake?

His smile faded. "Unfortunately," he said carefully, "I do not know if I could allow myself to give in to those feelings, knowing what I know now. I was literally created to be the love interest for Suzumiya-san's obvious self-insert character, and…"

He closed his eyes, and to my surprise, I actually found myself feeling sorry for him. Again. "Even as I could not accept a relationship built on lies during the time that I was monitoring her, I do not believe I would be comfortable with…"

"I think I get it," I said after he trailed off. "You'd feel like you had no free will."

"I would have to be utterly convinced that the feelings were real, and… even then, I'm not certain whether I would ever be free from doubt." He then smiled more like his usual self. "But all of this is irrelevant, given that Suzumiya-san may yet have eyes for someone else at this table."

I flashed back to a series of kisses the previous night, and quickly changed the subject. "So what about the time travelers and the

IDSE?"

"I'm afraid I do not know their current status," he admitted, "but I'm sure Asahina-san and Nagato-san will be able to fill you in on that in good time."

My lunchtime conversation with Haruhi was *d é j à v u* all over again, as she excitedly told me about how quickly she and Sakuragi-san had "clicked," and how the presumed slider had agreed to join us at today's Brigade meeting.

Some of the details were different, naturally: instead of a martial artist, Sakuragi-san was a concert pianist, and while Haruhi again expressed a "suspicion" that her new recruit might be a lesbian, it was not because of any existing relationship, but of the way she briefly (but wistfully) described a previous love. The sliders' reputation for their Sapphic leanings remained intact, but of course I was not going to be the one to say that to Haruhi.

The rest of the day passed in a blur of mental questions with no answers, and after the final bell I took the familiar path to the club room while Haruhi repeated history by roping the new arrival into helping her with cleaning duties.

Nagato and Asahina-san were there when I arrived, which was not in itself unusual, but two specific details served to verify that the world had indeed changed. First of all, rather than in her normal position at the chair by the window with a book in her lap, Nagato was sitting at the table, sharing a corner and a cup of tea with Asahina-san, as they chatted softly to one another. I don't know that I had ever seen the two of them having an actual conversation like this, and it was both surreal and very heartwarming.

The second detail was the way they looked up at me as I came into the room, and smiled. *Both* of them.

"Kyon-kun," Asahina-san said warmly. "Would you like some tea?"

"That would be most welcome, thank you," I said, taking the seat opposite where she had been moments before. She returned with a cup of her usual ambrosia. "You both look well," I noted as she reclaimed her seat, so that Nagato was between us at the head of the table. "I've already spoken to Koizumi. Asahina-san, are you… um… fully human now?" Not that she could possibly be *fully* human: there had to be at least *some* angel in her genetic makeup.

"Yes, I am," she said, blushing slightly. "Admittedly, I don't feel very different, but all of the mental blocks given to me by my superiors seem to be gone. Also…" She raised one hand to her chest. "If I concentrate, I can definitely feel something warm inside me."

"Your *Souma*," Nagato nodded.

Hearing Nagato's soft voice reminded me of one of my primary concerns in this new world. "Nagato, in class today I heard that Asakura would be returning next week."

"Indeed," said Nagato with another nod. "I was informed of this as well."

By whom? Kimidori-san?

"By the Integrated Data Sentient Entity," Nagato explained.

Wait, what?

"I am once more in contact with the Entity," she went on. "However, I remain both human, and independent of the Consensus. We have struck a bargain, wherein I will continue to supply them with observations… but when *I* choose to do so. In return, I may once again access the data-stores of the Entity. It is a… mutually beneficial arrangement."

So… the Entity had read-only access to Nagato, and she had Administrator access to the Entity?

"That analogy will suffice," she said, one corner of her mouth turning up ever-so-slightly before she covered it by taking another sip of her tea. "As for Asakura Ryōko, she is no longer a threat. She will return to her duties as backup, but given the newly diminished potential of Suzumiya Haruhi as well as the similarly diminished strength of the individual data terminals, her faction is not currently seeking to 'rock the boat,' as it were. She will be on a very short leash."

Had Nagato just given me back-to-back sentences using metaphors?

"And what about you?" I asked Asahina-san. "Has there been any contact from the time travelers?"

She shook her head, looking a tiny bit sad. "No, there hasn't. Between that and having lost my conditioning, I don't know that they exist any longer."

That seemed unfairly harsh, and I was about to say so when Asahina-san shook her head rapidly. "It's okay, really! I don't have many memories of where I came from, to be honest, and now I know that most of them were… *implanted* anyway, so… really, I don't know if any of my future technically *existed* in the first place, or if it was all just back-story for my character."

But then what about the older Asahina-san? *She* had certainly existed. Was she gone now?

Then it occurred to me that she was not gone at all: she was sitting right in front of me. Asahina-san (big) or Asahina-san (small) was not the issue at all: what was important was that Asahina-san *herself* had survived this transition, and would now have the chance to become her older self without all that pre-destiny bother getting in her way.

"So I may not be a time-traveler any longer," she continued, smiling more earnestly, "but maybe with the *Souma* I can be something else now instead. I… don't think I have it in me to be a protector like

Nagato-san, but Minamoto-san says she thinks I might be more of a natural healer."

Not surprising in the least. But hang on… when had this conversation with Chikaru-san taken place?

"In the Great Library, after their bodies were reconstructed," Nagato explained. "We remained there while Lilith reversed time and Suzumiya Haruhi communed with Eve."

And why didn't I remember any of this?

"You spent the entire time unconscious," Asahina-san smiled almost apologetically. "They said maybe you were in shock from witnessing Eve's appearance."

"Tendō Rushuna saw to your healing, however," said Nagato.

"I was jealous of that part," Asahina-san frowned.

For a moment I was too confused to make the connection, but then I remembered how the impossibly buxom Rushuna-san had gone about *healing* Hazuki-san after the fight with Asakura, and I felt my face heat up. Of all the things to be unconscious for…

Before I could venture deeply into the thought of Asahina-san being jealous of this, the subject of that thought suddenly looked extremely nervous. "Um, Kyon-kun? Um… I just wanted to say… I'm… I mean… I apologize for what I did last night."

Amazingly, I didn't immediately grasp her meaning. One might assume that such a memory would have been the first thing to come to mind. "Oh!" I said, pointing vaguely toward my face. "You mean when you… um… when you…"

"When she kissed you," Nagato elaborated.

Asahina-san made a small squeak. "Um, yes, I mean, I…" She looked away miserably.

"Oh, it's okay!" I said. *Okay?* Of course it was *okay* . It was light-years better than *okay* . "I… didn't mind at all." *Mind?* Was I *out of my* mind? *That* was the best I could say?

"I do not intend to apologize for kissing you," Nagato offered.

"Uh… that's… that's fine too," I managed. "Seriously, it was looking like it might be the end of the world. People do crazy things when doomsday is breathing down their necks. I'm absolutely fine with what happened." And I would be fine with it happening again, but I didn't dare say so.

Awkward silence: go.

"I have made an observation about my now-human physiology," Nagato said then. "In my prior incarnation, there was a specific aspect of my physical form wherein I inhibited my body's natural growth for the sake of keeping a consistent appearance, as well as for ease of motion in potential combat situations. It may please you to know that I may no longer inhibit this growth, and this part of me will develop normally from this point onward."

Asahina-san looked too stunned by this improbable declaration to even give one of her customary surprised "meep" sounds, leaving it up to me to respond. "Um… is that so… Nagato?"

"I believe you will be pleased with the outcome," the girl in question nodded, calmly taking another sip of her tea.

"And… why do you say that?"

She turned to look me in the eye. "I have it on reasonable authority that you possess a marked preference for ponytails."

Asahina-san and I both let out the breaths we had been holding. "Ah, I see," I smiled weakly. "Your… *hair* . Of course. Um… it's hard for me to picture you with a ponytail, to be honest, but if you want to try it, by all means."

Nagato blinked slowly, then the light seemed to dawn. "You thought I was referring to my brea-"

"So!" I interrupted. "Ponytail! Sure, give it a shot. You can always cut it if you change your mind."

We now return you to our previous awkward silence.

Nagato took another small sip of her drink. "For similar reasons, those are quite likely to develop further as well, though perhaps not to your demonstrated levels of preference." She then looked pointedly at Asahina-san.

I couldn't tell whether all the air had left the room, or if the remaining air had just gotten very, very warm. Probably the latter: the blush on poor Asahina-san's face was giving off more wattage than a space heater. "Nagato-san!" she squeaked.

"As indicated previously, you may call me Yuki," Nagato said in a surprisingly reassuring tone. "Even if we are to be romantic rivals, we should not allow this to prevent us from being friendly with one another."

Romantic… rivals..?

"But… but…" Asahina-san floundered desperately, "Naga… I mean, Yuki-san..! I don't want to be… *rivals* with you!"

"I would find a standard rivalry unpleasant as well," Nagato agreed, then leaned closer to the other girl. "We should not discount the possibility of polyamory, particularly now that we have witnessed a functioning demonstration of such a relationship." She then placed one hand atop Asahina-san's, and I saw that telltale faint glimmer of green as they touched.

Now… I wasn't sure what sort of mental communication they might have been doing through their *Souma* just then, but Asahina-san's panicked face slowly transformed to surprise, and then a smile. Not

just any smile, though: a terrifyingly mischievous one. To my continued horror, Nagato was mirroring this expression, though hers was less obvious. Then, both of them turned to look at me.

My relief at seeing Koizumi in the hallway earlier that day was infinitesimal compared to the relief I felt as he came into the club room at that moment. "Good afternoon, friends," he smiled sunnily. "A fine day to be alive, if I do say so myself."

"I'll get your tea, Koizumi-kun," Asahina-san smiled as she rose to fetch the pot, but not before shooting another impish look at me over her shoulder. Nagato, meanwhile, had returned to her normal inscrutable expression, but she was looking at me with obvious intent.

I didn't know whether to be aroused or to fear for my life.

"Heyas, everyone!" came another voice as Tsuruya-san breezed into the room. She quickly zeroed in on Asahina-san to give her a hug that was closer to a snuggle (making the shorter girl nearly spill the tea she was pouring), then found the seat opposite Koizumi and made herself comfortable at the table.

Haruhi arrived moments later, with Sakuragi-san in tow. "Everyone!" our leader loudly declared. "We have a guest and potential new member with us today! This is Sakuragi Kaori-chan."

" *Hajimemashite,"* Sakuragi-san said again, giving the room a bow.

Our guest was greeted in turn by Koizumi (with his customary schmooze), Asahina-san (with an offer for tea), Tsuruya-san (with an appraising look), and lastly Nagato (with a polite nod). Realizing then that it was my turn, I stood and bowed. "Pleased to meet you, Sakuragi-san."

"Thank you all," she smiled in reply, and unless I missed my guess, there was something *knowing* in her expression. "Suzumiya-san has said so much about you all… I feel like I know you already."

I suppose she *had* met all of us in one way or another, come to think of it.

After this came the expected rapid-fire tour of the room, where Haruhi regaled our guest with tales of the Brigade and its many exploits, using the costume rack, the computer, the bookshelves and even the electric heater as the launching-points for stories. Koizumi took this opportunity to get out the chess set, but to my surprise it was Tsuruya-san who demanded a match with him while the rest of us watched.

Under the table, a hand came to rest on my knee, and I froze, trying to determine from its angle of approach whether it belonged to Nagato or Asahina-san. Neither of their faces betrayed anything, and I felt a bead of sweat form on my brow. Whoever it was, she did not seem interested in roaming in one direction or the other, and I took that as a good sign.

"Anyway, Kaori-chan," came Haruhi's voice, "go ahead and have a seat: there's something I'd like to tell the whole- Oh, hi, Tsuruya-san! When did you get here?"

Had she honestly not noticed?

"Just snuck in," Tsuruya-san grinned. "I thought I'd start hanging out with you guys more often, if that's okay with you."

"Of course!" said Haruhi. "Far as I'm concerned, you've always been one of us anyhow, so it's just as well that you're here for this."

"Do you have an announcement for us, Commander?" Koizumi asked smoothly, as Sakuragi-san took the remaining chair beside him.

"As a matter of fact I do," Haruhi nodded, but then her normal all-is-right-with-the-world smile faded a bit as she looked over the group. "Look… we've been together for a long time now, and… I wonder

sometimes about whether or not this group has been fulfilling its original purpose."

She began to circle the table, pausing a moment to put one hand on Sakuragi-san's shoulder and the other on Koizumi's as she stood between them. "As you all know… well, most of you, anyway… the SOS Brigade was formed to seek out the strange and unusual in the world. Aliens. Time travelers. Psychics. Dimension-hoppers. The supernatural and unexplained. We'd track them down, find them, and then have fun with them."

Next, Haruhi went to stand behind Asahina-san, and leaned in to give the seated girl a hug across her shoulders rather than going for a grope as she might have done in the past. "Somehow I ended up with all of you guys, though. Not that that's a *bad* thing, but… sometimes I got frustrated, like all that stuff I wanted was just out of reach, and I know I sometimes took it out on you. I guess I was too focused on what *wasn't* happening, you know?"

Was this *contrition* in Haruhi's voice?

"Anyway," she went on, circling around the head of the table and fondly ruffling Nagato's hair before she came around behind me and put her hands on my shoulders. "I'm still convinced that those things are out there, and I know we'll find them."

She leaned in closer behind me, and I gradually found my head resting… well, use your imagination, but between that and the hand on my knee I was not about to move a muscle at that point. "I know I've never told you guys much about this," she said more softly, "but… I've seen things in my life that can't be explained by science and logic. It's out there, I promise you."

One of her hands went from my shoulder to Tsuruya-san's, but she quite doggedly left the rest of herself right where it was. "Meantime, though… I hope you're all having as much fun with the search as I've been. You guys may not be the weird and wondrous that I had in

mind, but… now that you're here, I couldn't have imagined a better group of friends to go with on this journey."

Ignoring the fact that Haruhi was being more sincere than I had ever heard her, never mind the fact that for the most part this group was *quite literally* what she had imagined, I did what my role in the story demanded.

"Haruhi," I said, "I think I speak for all of us when I say… that that was probably the single corniest thing you've ever said in your life."

"Penalty," she snorted, leaning back to give me a (mostly) gentle dope-slap on the back of the head. "Just for that, you're in charge of making sure Kaori-chan gets home safely tonight, and don't *ever* let me catch you mocking your Brigade Leader's soft side again."

In the end, it came as no surprise that Sakuragi-san had moved into Apartment 505 of the same building where Nagato resided: I guess the IDSE was going to have to make other plans for Asakura once she returned.

My so-called escort mission went very quietly, as Nagato did not have much to say, and Sakuragi-san, while briefly acknowledging that she was the slider who had communicated with me via my phone the night of Lilith's visit, stated that she would prefer to tell the whole story once we were safely to her new apartment. Thus, when she invited us to join her, both Nagato and I followed her to the fifth floor and left our shoes at her door.

Apartment 505 was bustling with activity as we arrived, and I saw several familiar faces amongst those present: Kaname-san and Ryofu-san were assembling bookcases, Mutsumi-san was precariously balanced on a footstool as she hung curtains, and Rushuna-san was in the kitchen unboxing dishes and putting them in cupboards.

" *Tadaima,"* Sakuragi-san said to the room.

With a ragged chorus of " *Okaeri nasai,"* everyone in the room turned to face us, and then to my surprise, started applauding, whistling, and outright cheering. Chikaru-san emerged from one of the open bedroom doors with a laundry basket in her hands, which she then put down to join the applause. At this point I finally saw Hazuki-san: she and another girl I did not immediately recognize had been hooking up the wiring to a large entertainment system.

While the other girl went straight to Sakuragi-san to take her hands, Hazuki-san, to my abject surprise, stepped right up to me and gave me what might have been, in retrospect, the single-most *comforting* hug I'd ever received in my life. Somehow, seeing her again, more so than even the others, made it clear once and for all that we had succeeded, and I could practically feel the day's anxiety draining away. The danger had passed, and we would soon be back to normal. Or what passed for it.

The others soon crowded around us, and I experienced everything from having my shoulder patted (by Ryofu-san), to my butt slapped (I'm pretty sure by Kaname-san), to being sandwiched between Rushuna-san and Mutsumi-san: another hug I am not likely to ever forget.

I have to say, for being mostly Japanese the sliders were without a doubt the most touchy-feely group I'd ever met. I looked around for Nagato, suddenly worried that she would be buried under the onslaught of affectionate dimension-travelers, but found her quite contentedly hugging Chikaru-san, eyes closed and a tiny smile on her once expressionless face.

"Well," Hazuki-san said briskly, "I'm guessing you have questions."

You could say that, yes.

"Let's get out of everyone's way, then," she chuckled, leading me to the open bedroom door as most of the others got back to their previous tasks. Soon, I was standing in a very much being-moved-

into bedroom with Hazuki-san, Nagato, Sakuragi-san, Chikaru-san, and the girl whose name I could not yet place.

Hazuki-san took care of that part for me, though. "Kyon-kun, this is Suzumi Tamao, whom you've… sort of met."

"It's a pleasure to finally meet in person, Kyon-san," the girl bowed. She was shorter than either Hazuki-san or Chikaru-san, and had dark blue-black hair mostly tied back with a scarf, leaving two long locks to fall to either side of her face.

"Likewise," I bowed in return, then did the same toward Chikaru-san as well. "Thank you for… well… it doesn't feel like quite enough to just say Everything, does it?"

"The feeling of thanks is mutual," Chikaru-san giggled, stepping up next to Suzumi-san and slipping an arm around her waist. She was mirrored on the other side by Hazuki-san, and I realized that for the first time I was seeing the three of them together, just as Mutsumi-san had once expressed hope that I would.

And do you know what? They *did* look pretty damned good together. Maybe I was getting used to the whole same-sex relationship thing. Or maybe it was because all three of them were girls that I would normally have found at least moderately attractive. I don't know. Perhaps best not to consider that, especially when there were more important things to go over.

When I tried to think of any specific questions, though, I pulled a blank, and eventually I just settled on: "So, um, what happens now?"

"Well, as you've probably noticed," said Hazuki-san, "Kaori is moving in, and will be attending your school from here out."

That much seemed apparent, but didn't Sakuragi-san have people that would miss her back at her own home?

"That's a long story in itself," Sakuragi-san said with a slight shake of the head. "The short version is that I… don't really have anywhere to go back to, so… this world will be my adopted home."

"It's very important to us that Kaori-chan be left in good company, though," Suzumi-san added.

"She will be," said Nagato.

"True," I nodded. "You've already caught Haruhi's attention: I daresay you'll never have a dull moment."

"That's good to hear," Sakuragi-san smiled thinly. "As well, since my *Souma* is also maker-based, I'll be able to provide something of a counter to Suzumiya-san."

But wasn't Haruhi mostly de-powered by now?

"To an extent, yes," Chikaru-san nodded. "Much of her *Souma* was dispersed to the world around you, which has… well, let's just say things will still be *interesting* here."

"This is why the IDSE and the Organization still exist?" Nagato asked.

"Exactly," said Hazuki-san. "For the most part, they're now living creatures with a mild affinity for tapping into the universe's own *Souma*, but they don't have any of their own, except for yourself and Koizumi-kun."

"However, Suzumiya-san still has a significant amount of raw power," Sakuragi-san went on. "More than any of the rest of us, certainly. For now, I'll serve as her counter-balance, and when she's ready, I'll be able to teach both her and the rest of you how to use it properly." She smiled again, but it was still a bit strained. "I've learned a lot recently about how important it is to take this gift seriously, and that's another reason why I volunteered to stay with all of you."

"Kaori-chan," Suzumi-san said quietly, crossing over to again take the other girl's hands. Obviously there was a story here, but for now at least it was not mine to hear.

"On the subject of When She's Ready," I asked instead, "why doesn't Haruhi remember anything from this past weekend? That almost feels like a step back."

Hazuki-san exchanged glances with Chikaru-san. "We were a little surprised as well," said the latter, "but it was actually Suzumiya-san herself who asked for that. She's no longer in denial about having had a sister, but… for some reason she didn't want to know the rest of it yet."

Yet?

"Personally, I think she's not quite ready for the search to be over," said Hazuki-san. "I think she still wants a chance to make those discoveries herself, and just having it all spelled out for her would spoil the fun."

At that moment, Rushuna-san leaned in at the doorway, holding a pair of decorative plates. "Kaori-chan, where would you like these?"

"I'll take care of those," said Sakuragi-san. She then excused herself to follow the gunslinger back toward the kitchen. Suzumi-san excused herself as well to join her, but not before giving each of her girlfriends a gentle hand-squeeze.

Once they were gone, Chikaru-san let out a small sigh. "Something I cannot stress enough, Kyon-kun, is that Kaori-chan is *very* important to us. Please do what you can to make her feel at home."

Like I said earlier, I didn't think that would be any problem now that she was on Haruhi's radar. I looked out toward the living room to see that Sakuragi-san and Suzumi-san, having apparently finished with whatever they were doing, were standing very close, forehead to forehead, both hands clasped, and Suzumi-san was speaking quietly

but intently to the other girl. From that alone, I could feel the attachment they had to the sister they would be leaving with us. How deeply did the bonds between *Souma* -bearers run, anyway?

That was when it occurred to me that the rest of the Brigade would now have that bond as well, because of who they had been before this divine intervention. I remembered Nagato's description of sharing this energy with others, and realized that everyone in this crowded apartment was part of that community, along with Haruhi, Asahina-san, Koizumi and Tsuruya-san.

At that moment, my heretofore cherished role as the only "normal" one in the group began to feel a little lonely.

"Any other burning questions?" Hazuki-san asked, breaking the short silence.

"Will we see any of you again?" Nagato asked, and her tone was just wistful enough to reinforce that feeling of not being One Of Them. This, in turn, immediately made me want to self-chastise for feeling sorry for myself while Nagato was the one being wistful.

"Of course you will," Chikaru-san smiled, pulling Nagato in for a one-armed hug. "I'm sure that once everything's sorted out with the rest of Eve's kin, we'll be able to have some of the most *amazing* tea parties back at the Great Library."

"Aside from which, we might be asking for your assistance one of these days," Hazuki-san said with a snort. "There are worlds even more screwed up than this one, and we may need all the help we can get." She then muttered something that sounded like "Damned incubators," but I didn't feel like asking what she meant.

"Also, to be painfully honest, this world is not *entirely* out of the woods yet," Chikaru went on. "There have never been seven *Souma* -bearers in one book, at least long-term, so… we'll be checking back now and then. At the very least, Lilith has considered moving this book to her 'special shelf' for closer attention."

"Stick with Kaori," Hazuki-san nodded. "She'll steer you right."

I was so horrified by the mental image of what else might be on Lilith's "special shelf" that it took a moment for the math to kick in. Haruhi, Nagato, Koizumi, Asahina-san, Tsuruya-san, Sakuragi-san, and..?

"Are… are you staying as well, Hazuki-san?" I asked carefully.

She frowned. "No, just Kaori. Why do you ask?"

"Then there should only be six Souma-bearers in this world, shouldn't there? Or am I forgetting someone?"

The two sliders looked at me strangely for a moment, and then they both seemed to get it at once, whatever *it* was. "You mean nobody's..?" Hazuki-san asked, then sighed heavily. "Gotta love Japan."

"Indeed," Chikaru-san giggled. "Nagato-san, perhaps you should offer Kyon-kun your hand?"

Nagato looked startled for a moment, but then she turned to me and held out her hand, an unmistakable look of hope crossing her pale features. Not sure what else to do, I took the offered hand in mine.

And *that* was when I felt it.

Nagato's hand was warm: not normal human-slash-mammalian skin temperature, but possessing a warmth *inside* that was in constant motion, almost as though I could feel the blood running through its vessels, or the impulses firing along her nerves. And I can't explain how (at least, I couldn't then), but I could tell that this… *presence*, for lack of a better word, wanted to… well, come and visit me.

And because it was Nagato, I suppose I decided I was okay with that.

The moment I made that decision, the warmth rushed into me, and suddenly I knew what it was: it was Nagato's *Souma* . She was sharing it with me after all. And it felt…

Well, I don't know that I can adequately describe it with words, except to say that it felt really, *really* pleasant, and I was in no hurry at all to let go of her hand. Neither, apparently, was she.

"Something… exceptional has just taken place," Nagato said quietly, and I could hear the words with more than just my ears.

"But I thought you couldn't share with…" I started, but that was when I realized two things: firstly, that this flow of energy was two-way, as though we had formed a circuit with one another, and secondly, that not all of it belonged to Nagato.

"Welcome to the club, Kyon-kun," Chikaru-san smiled impishly.

"How..?" I managed.

"It was when Eve and Suzumiya-san met again, on the rooftop," Hazuki-san explained. "You were close enough that you, ah, caught a bit of the spillover."

"It's possible, of course, that Suzumiya-san might have *wanted* this to happen," Chikaru-san added. "Either way, you're a Sister of Eve now… just one that happens to be male."

Do you remember back when I talked about giving voice to a thought before you can think better of it? I think I deserve some slack, though, given the situation.

"Does this mean I'm going to be a lesbian now?" I heard myself ask.

The two sliders burst out laughing. "You should be so lucky," said Hazuki-san.

Nagato looked up at me, and her smile, however small, was more brilliant than a hundred galaxies. "A world of infinite possibilities has

presented itself," she whispered.

Feeling that amazing rush of the energy of creation itself, I found myself once again flooded with questions, mostly about what all of this meant for me, for Nagato, for Haruhi, for potential romantic rivalries, for friendships which had just gained an impossible and potentially uncomfortable level of intimacy, but most of all for the future.

The lattermost of those, however, had a clear answer: the world was not back to "normal," and never would be again. Or more accurately, the new "normal" was something befitting Haruhi: the girl who'd set all of this into motion in the first place.

The journey would continue, with Haruhi leading the way as always, and it was going to be even more insane and incomprehensible than the past year had already been.

There would be no room for complacency in the new "normal."

And honestly? That would be just fine.

The End

Suzumiya Haruhi no Yami (The Darkness of Haruhi Suzumiya)

by Rain Fletcher (Suzume CA)

25 July 2012 - 30 March 2016

Azuma Hazuki, Lilith and Eve are from ***Yami to Boushi to Hon no Tabibito*** , created by Root/Carnelian and animated by Studio Deen

Minamoto Chikaru, Suzumi Tamao, Kenjō Kaname and Sakuragi Kaori are from ***Strawberry Panic*** , created by Sakurako Kimino and

animated by Madhouse

Otohime Mutsumi, Urashima Keitaro and Narusegawa Naru are from ***Love Hina*** , created by Ken Akamatsu and animated by Xebec

Ryofu Hōsen (of the pink-haired female variety) is from ***Koihime Musou*** , created by BaseSon and animated by Dogakobo

Tendō Rushuna is the titular character (no pun intended) of ***Grenadier*** , created by Sōsuke Kaise and animated by Group TAC and Studio Live

All other characters are from ***The Melancholy of Haruhi Suzumiya*** and related titles, created by Nagaru Tanigawa and animated by Kyoto Animation

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This story is dedicated to EmperorOfLemurs, for stories suggested, and to Brian "Durandall" Randall, both for stories told and for stories which will sadly remain untold

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